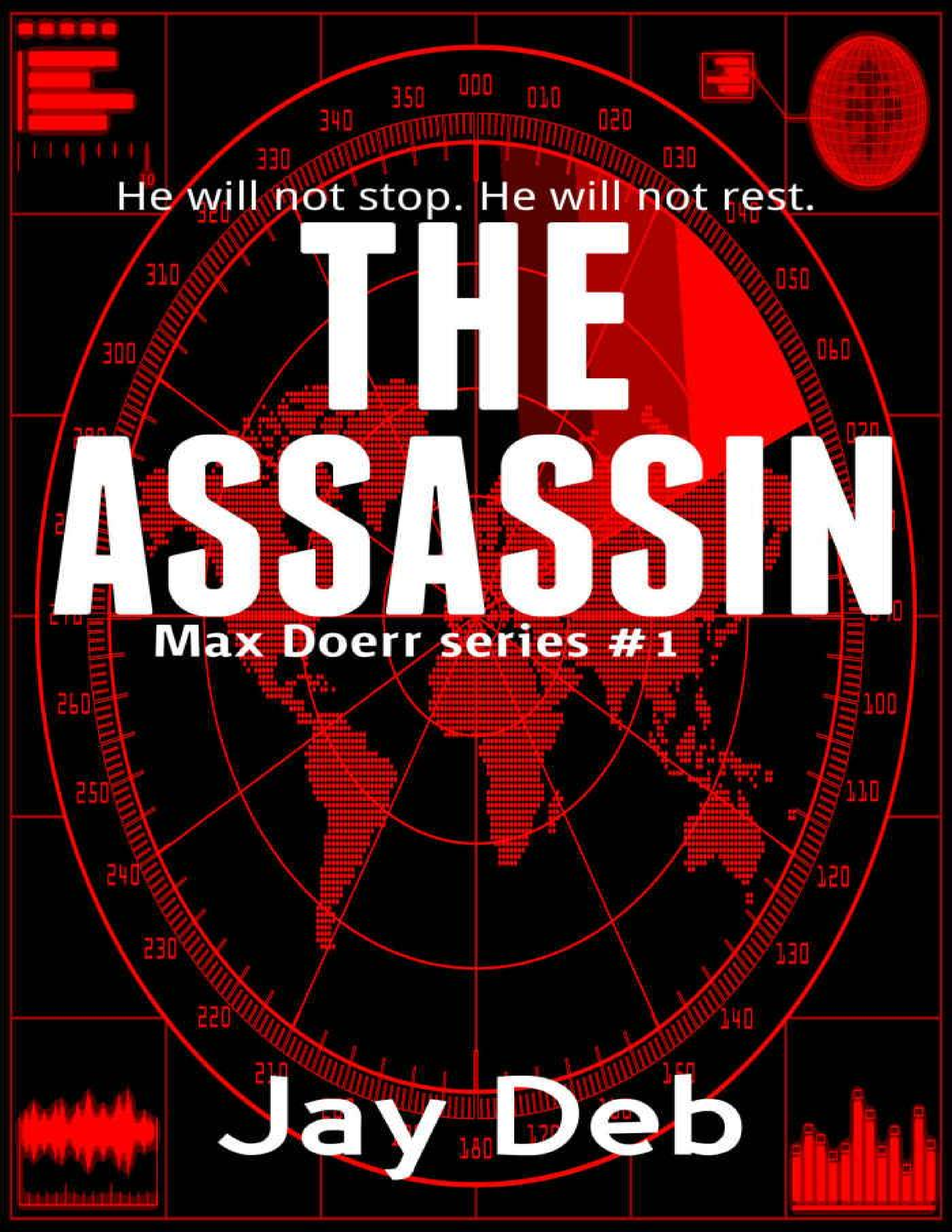

He will not stop. He will not rest.
THE ASSASSIN
Max Doerr series #1
Jay Deb

THE ASSASSIN (Max Doerr Book 1)

A Novel By
Jay Deb

https://www.facebook.com/AuthorJayDeb

Other books by the author: THE SCIENTIST (Max Doerr Book 2)
CONTRIVED

Reading level: 18 and above.
Dedicated to my mom.

Though this be madness, yet there is method in 't - Shakespeare.

CONTENTS

Here are some reader comments left at amazon.com about this book:

“ACTION PACKED, FAST PACED, SUSPENSE FILLED READ!”
“I loved reading this book, The Assassin! A lot of drama and suspense. Looking forward to the next book coming soon.”
“I liked the main character a great deal and I liked how the author kept the action moving throughout the door.”
“This is a well written novel. At one time we would have imagined this all as far fetched. But alas in our world now this all sounds pretty real. Very interesting read.”

“I really enjoyed this book. I have never read this author before, great. It certainly provided food for thought regarding the operations of the CIA.”
“Terrific read--love the action.”
“Gripping thriller.”

PROLOGUE

Billy's father had told him that his 3.1 GPA was not good enough, so he was studying hard. He was staying at his dad's apartment during the summertime, when college was out. Earlier in the day, his stepmom and dad had left for the Caribbean, for a long-awaited vacation. His stepmom had asked him if he wanted to go with them, but he knew that the expected answer was *no*.

Billy sat on a chair in front of a square table, a small lamp illuminating his ten-by-ten room. Billy focused on his accounting book; the image of a bright future danced in his eyes. He liked to read aloud, record it on his iPhone and listen to it later while waiting at the subway or elsewhere. He drew the book closer and immersed his mind in it.

Billy's iPhone rang; it was his girlfriend calling. He chatted with her for a while; time seemed to fly whenever he talked to her.

Billy was distracted by a cracking noise. It came from the balcony door.

"I gotta go," Billy said and hung up.

Normally he kept that balcony door open, as this part of the city was considered to be pretty safe. But that day he had closed and locked it, so he ignored the sound and continued with his studying. And then he heard the noise again. There was a stray black kitty that used to scratch on the door occasionally. *It must be the cat*, Billy thought.

When he heard the noise the third time, he decided to check it out. He stood up, stretched his arms, and walked over to the balcony door. He unlocked it and, with one swing, opened it and stuck out his head to see if the kitty was still there. There was no feline in sight. Sighing, he closed the door and placed his fingers on the lock, ready to shut it. And that was when it happened.

The door slid open like a lightning. Shocked, Billy raised his hand. A man extended his muscular hands from outside, trying to grab Billy's throat. But Billy was no weak man. At the young age of nineteen, his body was grown and strong from playing basketball every week, with his dad and his friends. He tilted backward and leaned to the right, pulling the door handle hard. But the muscular man had sharp instincts too. The man quickly extended his left foot to block the closing door. He placed his left hand on the frame

and pushed, to make just enough room to slide his body inside, as Billy took two steps back and shouted, “Who are you?”
Ignoring the question, the man, who was at least six feet tall with broad shoulders, lunged at Billy, and a scuffle followed. Billy had large muscles, but he was no match for the assailant. The man threw him on the floor with a thudding noise, sat on Billy’s chest and started sinking his strong fingers into Billy’s throat.
Struggling to take in air, Billy was suffocating as the man’s fingers tightened further. Billy felt a rush of energy to his hands and feet and pulled up his legs with lightning speed, wrapping them around the man’s neck and throwing him off. The man fell to the floor. With his knees pressed on the man’s belly, Billy had the man cornered. “Who are you? Why are you here?”
“Where is your father?” the man asked.
“My dad? He’s in the Caribbean,” Billy’s hands loosened, unknowingly. The man quickly sat up, and Billy’s knees fell from the man’s chest. The man threw a quick jab to Billy’s left cheek, throwing Billy on the floor; Billy’s feet brushed the side of his bed, and his head fell on the carpet, barely a foot from the leg of the table.
The man moved swiftly and climbed on Billy’s chest and held him down by the throat. He pulled out a six-inch boning knife. With one hand, the man pinned Billy’s forehead to the floor. Billy grabbed the man’s arm and tried to keep the knife away, but the effort proved futile as the man’s knife closed in on Billy’s throat and started sinking into the soft flesh under his chin. Feeling the sharp pain, Billy gave one last push. But the man was strong like an ox, and he sank his knife further down. Billy felt the warm blood dripping down his neck. The light seemed to get dimmer and dimmer, and finally, everything was dark.
Minutes later, Billy lay dead on the carpet. The blood dripped from both sides of his throat to the carpet that he had vacuumed only hours earlier. His shirt was bloody, one leg folded and the other one straight; his limp left hand lay on his chest and the other arm on the carpet. The honk of a passing by vehicle could be heard loud and clear through the open balcony door.
The assailant pulled out a piece of cloth and wiped the blood from his hands and the knife. He tucked the knife back inside his pocket, pulled out a white rubber glove and put it on his right hand. He walked out of the bedroom

after turning the lights off. He opened the apartment’s front door, and after cautiously closing it, he hurried to the elevator.

BOOK 1

CHAPTER 1

THE SUN SMILED above and bathed the entire beach in bright white light. Max Doerr sauntered along the warm waters of Playa Juanillo Beach with his wife, Gayle, hand in hand. His gaze moved from the soothing blue water to the palm trees, to the three kids who were building a sand castle. Doerr worked as an editor at a newspaper office in New York, and Gayle worked at the IT department of a large bank, which demanded long hours, sometimes working through nights, but the money was good. This vacation was a long-sought break from staring at a computer for both of them.

Doerr gently passed his hand over her auburn hair and rested his arm on her freckled shoulder. She was short compared to his six-feet four-inch, muscle-stuffed physique.

It was the first day of their first vacation since their honeymoon last year. Doerr could hardly believe it had been over a year already. It seemed just the other day when he had kissed her in front of everyone, including his teenage son, Billy. Doerr had been married before – it ended a long time ago when his wife had died, and he had become a widower and a single father.

Though it was love at first sight for Doerr, the timing of his marriage to Gayle could not have been better. They had been dating for two years, and Billy had been about to start college. Billy should have started his college a little earlier, had he not lost some time to drugs and subsequent therapy. Doerr had blamed his old job for Billy's behavior, but he was happy now, as the bad habits had passed, and his son was set to earn a college degree.

At thirty-three, Gayle was five years younger than Doerr, and it was her first marriage. It was not that she hadn't had suitors, but her overprotective mom had nixed quite a few.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" Doerr said to his wife as they continued to walk and soak their feet in the salty ocean water.

"It's marvelous." She pointed her fingers forward. "I like those hay huts. Let's check them out. What do you think is going on there?"

"They sell lemonade, beads, shells, all sorts of things. They try to rob you, honestly." He turned to her and smiled. "There are at least fifteen huts after that one."

"You've been here before?"

"No." He turned away from her. That was a lie.

“Then how do you know that?”
“I checked up on the net,” Doerr said.
“Really?” Her face was incredulous. “Sometimes you say things that just don’t make any sense.”
“I’ve never been here before,” he lied and looked away again. He had never been good at telling lies.
He had been here before. He knew the blue water, the white sand, and those huts. As the sand climbed on his toes and was eventually washed away by the persistent water, they seemed to know him too. He had been here on a job, eight years back. But he could not tell any of that to Gayle. His heart ached, and he wanted to pour out all his secrets to her. But she was someone who could hardly keep a secret. And if not anyone else, she would certainly divulge everything to her mom, who he disliked.
He took her hand and continued to walk silently.
A few minutes later, Gayle checked out each of those shops. They enjoyed some sugary lemonade as their skins tanned. She bought three necklaces made of shells and two large conchs – all for forty dollars.
“I told you they would rob you,” Doerr said.
“Oh, come on. We’re not coming here every day.” She held out one necklace. “This one is for Billy’s girlfriend.”
He took the necklace, held her around her waist and kissed her, then started walking back toward the hotel.
Three hours later they were back at their hotel room. Gayle stepped out of her bikini, ready to head for the bathroom. Doerr took a peek at her smooth, exposed back as he half-watched the news on the TV. He wished the next six days of their vacation in Punta Cana would pass as happily as this one.
She entered the bathroom, and Doerr could hear the water gushing through the plumbing. As he watched TV, he thought about his editing job at the newspaper, a job he loathed.
He kept watching the news as it started raining outside. *It’s odd to rain here at this time of year*, he thought.
Minutes later, Gayle came out of the bathroom, wrapped in a single white towel. “Go take a shower,” she said in a commanding voice.
He turned the TV off and stood up. “Thank God we hit the beach early.” He pointed outside.
“I hope the rain stops soon. I want to go to JellyFish restaurant.”
“I hope so too,” he said.

He rose grudgingly from the bed and headed for the bathroom as she started applying gel to her hair.

GAYLE REMOVED HER towel and started dressing. When she was finished, she took out the five pairs of shoes she had brought. She placed them on the floor and was weighing up which ones best matched her dress when the phone rang. She picked it up, wondering who it could be.

“Can I talk to Mr. Max Doerr?” a male voice at the other end asked.

“He’s in the bathroom. Can I take a message? I’m his wife.”

“Oh, good. I’m from the NYPD, Nineteenth Precinct.” The officer paused. “I’m afraid I have some very bad news.”

“What? What’s happened?”

The man at the other end cleared his throat and then said, “Ma’am, Mr. Doerr’s son, Billy, has been murdered.”

DOERR LIKED LONG, hot showers. They relaxed his muscles, massaged his skin and refreshed his mind. He was in the shower for almost thirty minutes. When he was finally done, he pulled on the same shorts he had worn before and came out of the bathroom. He expected Gayle to be all dressed up. Instead, he found her sitting on the bed, hands clasped together on her lap; her face was ghostly pale.

“What’s happened?” he asked. “Aren’t we going?”

She said nothing.

He moved closer and put his hand on her shoulder. “Aren’t we going, dear?”

“Max, sit down.” She pointed to the bed. “Something terrible has happened.”

WHEN DOERR ARRIVED back in New York, Billy's body had already been removed from the apartment. Doerr went straight from the airport to the morgue; the ride was surreal and seemed to take forever. He arrived at the ghastly scene at one a.m.

The sheet over Billy’s dead body was squeaky clean. When the official pulled the sheet off, Doerr felt as if all hopes in his life had drowned. A

terrible ringing noise hit his ears, and he fainted, almost falling to the ground. One official, a burly man, grabbed him; the man seemed to be used to that kind of reaction.

"Are you okay?" the man asked.

Only hours before, Doerr had received the macabre news. It seemed that his worst fear had just come to his door, knocked hard and woke him up from a dream. He looked at his son's bloodless face, and floods of tears wanted to erupt from his eyes. But he controlled himself and said, "Yes."

"Now, Mr. Doerr." The official looked straight at Doerr's eyes. "I know this is a hard time for you. But I have to ask you, officially. Is this the body of your son, Billy Doerr?"

"Yes," Doerr said. But to him it felt like someone else just said that affirmative word. His throat was dry, and a stream of grief ran from his throat to the center of his chest. He clenched his fists hard, wishing he was holding the murderer's throat.

IN NEW YORK City, the majority of people finished work between five and six p.m. To beat the subway rush, some folks made arrangements with their bosses to leave early, some stayed late. Doerr stayed late, but for a different reason. He was an editor at a newspaper, and as news came in throughout the day, most of the editing work was done during the late hours. Though he hated his job, he felt he had a responsibility to the readers.

It was eight thirty p.m. when he finished editing the piece he was working on at the computer. It was a story about how an eight-year-old boy had been killed in Brooklyn while his mother had gone to pick up a few grocery items. Doerr decided to review his work. As he neared the end of the story, two teardrops fell on the table. The remorse filled him, thinking that if he had not gone on holiday two weeks ago, maybe Billy would be alive today. *Maybe*.

He clicked on the print icon on his monitor and collected the paper from the printer. He walked to Carl's office, where his boss sat facing a laptop on the right edge of the table. He wore a pair of metal-rimmed reading glasses, and more than a hundred books filled the rack behind him. Newspapers from the last few days lay strewn on the table. Carl raised his face from the computer and turned to face Doerr.

“I can’t do this report.” Doerr threw down the printout of the draft copy he had just written. “Give it to someone else, please.” Doerr turned to leave.
“Darn it, Max.” Carl looked at Doerr over his reading glasses. “I have no one else. The other editor was laid off two months back.”
“Why can’t we report more positive stories? I’m sick and tired of writing these ghastly tales.”
“What kind of positive reports are you talking about?” Carl asked and took his glasses off and blew air on them.
“Positive things, like advances in medical fields.” Doerr took a step toward Carl. “The new way of doing surgery that the Mayo Clinic has invented, which reduces the recovery period for a special type of neck surgery from three months to one month. Why can’t we report more on the new genetic therapy invented for HIV? I sent you the report. Just check your email.”
“I saw those. But you know as well as I do that these murder stories are what sells the newspaper.” Carl sat up straight in his chair. “Who will read fucking boring reports from Mayo or NIH or CDC? Mother goes to supermarket, comes back and finds her son murdered. Complains about authorities. The congressman dude says *blah, blah, blah*. Put that fucking news on the front page and boom!” Carl clapped his hands. “We sell ten thousand more newspapers. That’s how we run this damn business, Max. Otherwise, very soon we’ll go under, just like the others – kicked down by the darn Internet news sites.”
Doerr knew Carl was right. The business had to be financially viable first. But he was sick of the smell of death all around, and he stood his ground.
“From now on, no more than one murder story per week for me. You got that? Otherwise, I quit.”
“I’ll see what I can do,” Carl said and pointed his finger to the paper that Doerr had just thrown on his table. “Now read that report again, polish it up and send me the soft copy in twenty minutes. I can’t wait any longer.”
“That’s all you are going to get.” Doerr took a step forward and tapped his finger on the piece of paper. “Give me some other report, and I will edit it.” Doerr started walking away.
“Hang on, Max. I know you’re going through a rough time. Why don’t you take some time off?” Carl paused. “Actually, I can’t afford to give you time off.” Doerr heard Carl sigh.
“Why don’t we do this?” Carl said. But Doerr was in no mood to listen. He proceeded to his desk.

DOERR GOT UP to the shrill noise of the alarm at seven a.m. He did not see the sunlight he expected. He wasn't used to waking up so early. He adjusted his eyes and knew Gayle had already left for work a while ago. He sat up on his bed and could see the streetlights still glowing outside; the sun was yet to come out in full force. He got up, freshened and was ready to leave in about ten minutes.

Doerr was headed for the assisted-living place in Queens, where his mother had been cared for over the last five years. He took a train on line seven and arrived just before nine. It was a cloudy, humid and grumpy morning. The streets were soaked and dirty from the rainy night before.

He waited in the lobby of the assisted-living building for the clock to strike nine, the start of the visitation time. He could see three old women sitting at a table, two of them talking, the other looking into the vacant space.

Doerr was soon in the room where his mother lay in a twin-size bed with a wooden head panel. A wheelchair sat right next to the bed. The room had one medium-sized window, and not enough sunlight was coming in. Doerr turned on the light and stood next to his sleeping mother.

"Mom," Doerr said softly and gave her wrist a gentle shake. "Mom."

She opened her eyes and appeared to recognize her son. Elated, she sat up and held her son's hand. Doerr sat down next to her. "How are you?"

The pleasantries continued for a few minutes, and then his mom said, "Max, you should find a good girl and get married soon."

Doerr sighed. "Mom, I'm married already."

She suffered from Alzheimer's disease. Before moving to the elderly care home, his mother had lived with him in his apartment for a few years. But when her condition had worsened, the doctor had recommended assisted living, where she could be monitored and cared for twenty-four seven.

Doerr took out his smartphone and showed her a picture of Gayle. "Isn't she beautiful?"

"Yes." His mother's face lit up. "What does she do? How did you meet her?"

"She works with computers at a big bank." Doerr started telling her about Gayle, which he had done many times, and he knew all too well that his mom would not remember anything he was saying. He also knew that he

would repeat the same thing to her again, sooner or later. But he never felt tired. In fact, he felt joy telling her about Gayle's qualities.

Ten minutes later, his mom asked, "How is Billy? I haven't seen the boy for a long time."

Doerr didn't say anything. He could not. His chest felt heavy, and moisture started gathering at the corners of his eyes. He took a deep breath and, without a shred of emotion, said, "Billy is doing fine. Busy with his studies."

Even if he told her the truth, she would not remember. Billy would always be alive in her mind. For a fraction of a second, Doerr wished he had his mother's affliction.

DOERR TOOK A late subway train from his work. As the train moved forward through the tunnel, he felt as if his heart was collapsing and his brain crashing from the sadness of his son's death.

A few Tuesdays back, at around the same time, his son had been killed while he vacationed in Punta Cana. When he heard everything from the police officers, he felt like choking the killer with his own hands. If only he knew who that killer was. He had gone back to work after only one week's break, just so he could get out of the apartment where Billy had been murdered so viciously. He was only nineteen and had twenty thousand ambitions. He'd had a bright future ahead of him, but it had ended before it had truly begun.

Police had assured Doerr that the killer would be found soon. Another apartment dweller had seen a mysterious man leave the building at around the time Billy had been killed. He was a tall, large-framed man and wore a big cap. Doerr hoped the cops were right.

If the cops did not find the killer within a month, he promised himself, he would take the matter into his own hands and find the culprit and kill him. Killing was nothing new to him. He remembered the first time he had killed a man.

IT HAD HAPPENED fifteen years ago in a five-star hotel in downtown Chicago. Doerr was given the target's picture and the time when the man

would check in. He patiently waited in the lobby, pretending to read a magazine. Doerr observed the man standing at the check-in counter.

The man was wearing a pair of black sunglasses, a black suit, and a black hat. Even his suitcase was pitch-black. Doerr looked the man over from top to bottom and took mental pictures as the man finished his check-in and gave a wide smile to the hotel clerk. The man proceeded to the elevator, and Doerr followed him.

The elevator stopped at the eleventh floor, where the man got out and headed for his room. Doerr followed him slowly, without raising suspicion. The man stopped in front of his room, inserted his key and opened the door. Doerr could have easily stormed in and choked the guy to death, but he knew that there were risks that way – someone could pass by, or the man could surprise him with a secret weapon. Doerr walked by the door as it closed.

An hour later, Doerr patiently waited at the window in his own hotel room. He had made a special request to be placed in the strategically located room. With a clear view of the hotel front, holding the loaded M16 rifle, binoculars clamped, he waited and watched.

The man came out two hours later.

Doerr raised his rifle. The crosshair fixed on the man's head. There was no way he could miss the shot. He had trained for this kind of situation for days.

But he lowered the rifle.

AM I going to be a killer? An assassin? Doerr pondered the answer, and a few seconds later his mind was clear.

He raised the rifle again; the man was still within range, with yards to spare. He put his index finger on the trigger – ready to shoot – but he hesitated again. He closed his eyes, hoping the man would walk away. Ten seconds later, when he opened his eyes, the man was walking back; he must have forgotten something. Doerr fixed the crosshair on the man's head for the third time.

I promised to do this, he told himself. A boy passed by the man, and he waited until the boy was at a safe distance.

He took one last look and squeezed the trigger. Doerr watched the man drop to the ground as he absorbed the rifle recoil. He stood at the window for a few seconds. People were gathering around the dead man's body, and he

couldn’t see the crumpled corpse anymore. At least ten men stood, many looking up, trying to see where the bullet could have come from.
Doerr quickly moved away from the window and unassembled the rifle, just like he had practiced before. Then he hit the bed and took a nap. At around seven in the evening, a man knocked on his door. Doerr opened the door and ushered the man in.
Doerr handed over his rifle, unassembled and packed in a duffel bag.
The man took the bag. “There is a limo waiting outside.”
“For me?” Doerr asked.
“Yes. The deputy director is waiting in his hotel. He wants to have a chat with you about the operation.”
“Why can’t I just talk to him over the phone?” Doerr said in an irritated voice. He had already made plans with his old buddies to check out the local night clubs.
“He said it’s important,” the man said and took a step back. From the man’s demeanor, Doerr knew he did not really have the option to carry out the conversation over the phone. “He has a call scheduled with the president later in the evening.”
“Okay,” Doerr said with a sigh. He knew antagonizing the deputy director of the CIA would be suicide. It was barely a month since he had graduated from the agency’s one-year-long training program.
The man left, and Doerr called his buddy and gave him the bad news.
Twenty minutes later, Doerr walked out of the hotel and got into the waiting limo, which took him to another five-star hotel, where the deputy director was occupying the Presidential Suite. The suite was fitted with a red-decorated Persian carpet. Two large crystal chandeliers hung from the ceiling. Doerr had never seen such colossal chandeliers before.
Doerr sat on the plush sofa and waited for the deputy director to appear, which he did about fifteen minutes later. Doerr instantly recognized him. He had seen the middle-aged but skinny man’s picture before, but he was meeting the deputy director in person for the first time.
Doerr stood up. “A pleasure meeting you, sir.”
“Sit, sit.” The deputy director made a hand gesture. “Just call me Nick. We are all colleagues.”
Doerr sat down; Nick sat opposite him and continued, “I am pleasantly surprised by the nice work you did today. I guess Ted was right.”
Ted was the CIA recruiter who had taken Doerr in, a year earlier.

“I didn’t believe him at first,” Nick continued. “But when your trainer also said that you’re good at everything, especially sniping, I had full confidence in you. It’s unusual.”
Doerr frowned. “What is unusual, sir?” He immediately corrected himself. “Nick?”
“To send a rookie like you to such a job. But obviously I made the right decision.”
“About that, Nick,” Doerr said. “Who is the man I just killed?” He had been given a file earlier with the physical details of the target. But the detail he was interested in was not included in the file – the target’s identity, which Doerr suddenly became determined to find out.
Nick’s face became gloomy; he looked at Doerr and then at the floor.
Nick raised his face and made an effort to cheer up. “Let’s have some champagne first.” Nick made a hand gesture to someone inside one of the rooms in the suite.
Doerr didn’t see anyone else, but within half a minute, a man appeared in chef’s dress and held a plate with two glasses of champagne.
Nick took one glass, and Doerr took the other one.
“Cheers, young man.” Nick raised his glass and touched Doerr’s. Glasses collided, the clinking noise was heard, and the yellowish fluid made small waves inside the glasses. The two men sipped their alcohol. “You have been a catch for the agency. You are our assassin. You are *the assassin*. Cheers.” Nick laughed loudly.
For few seconds, no one spoke.
“Nick,” Doerr finally opened his mouth, “so who was that man?”
“The man,” raising the glass to his lips, Nick continued with a grumpy tone, “you will see all the details in tomorrow’s newspaper.”
Doerr dithered about what to do. He was already forming a negative opinion of Nick. He was pissed that he’d had to give up a fun-filled night and come all the way to meet this cuss, who would not answer a simple question with a simple reply.
Nick emptied his glass. “Well, thanks for coming, Max. I have to get ready to call the president. Meanwhile, you can enjoy drinks at the club downstairs. I was there earlier.” Nick winked. “The girls there are very pretty.”
Nick rose from the sofa, but Doerr just sat there. He made a decision. He needed to know who that man was. The newspapers would not have the

right information. In fact, the CIA training had taught him that the information that appeared in newspapers was barely fifty percent of the real thing.

Doerr stood up and faced Nick. “Sir, and I’m going to only call you sir. I need to know who that man was. Or else I’m not leaving this place.”

Nick finished the wine in the glass he was holding and picked up another from the chef, who was standing by with a tray with two fresh champagne glasses. Nick finished the first half of his second glass and made a gesture to the chef, who laid the plate down on the coffee table and left. Nick was visibly intoxicated. Doerr saw that, but he was also desperate to get the answer to his question.

Was he a bad man? How bad?

Was he a good man? Unlikely.

Doerr walked over to Nick, held him by his shoulders and then made him sit down on the sofa gently. Nick eased his butt into the sofa, his face red and breath thick with alcohol.

How is he going to talk to the president now? Doerr wondered. But to Doerr that was a second worry. First, he needed his answer.

Doerr knelt down in front of Nick and placed a hand on his knee. “Sir, who was that man? It is biting into my conscience, and I *have* to know now, sir.”

“Conscience, conscience,” Nick barked and made a dismissive move with his right hand. “Why does everyone have a conscience? Why can’t you just do what your employer tells you to?”

“Sir,” realizing that convincing was the best way to go at the point, Doerr said politely, “if I know exactly who that man was and why he needed to die, I will be able to do my next job more decisively and with more precision.”

Nick sighed, looked at the floor again and breathed heavily; Doerr was not sure whether it was from the effect of the alcohol or something else.

“Sir?” Doerr said and looked straight into the deputy director’s eyes.

“Okay,” Nick said. “I’ll tell you, but you have to promise me you’ll keep it zipped. And if the word leaks to the press, then your ass will be on fire, regardless of whether you leaked it or someone else did. Deal?”

“Deal.” Doerr had no hesitation in his voice.

“All right.” Nick shifted his position on the sofa. “The man’s name is David Khan.”

“David Khan?”

“Yes, yes. Weird name.” Nick rolled his eyes. “His parents called him Javed Khan, but he changed his name later. His parents came to America from Pakistan years ago. David Khan was born in Detroit. When he went to college, he changed his name. He dropped out at the beginning of his junior year. Then he opened an auto parts company. Within three years, he was doing business worth one hundred million, which was very odd, given that the auto industry was in decline. Rumor was that his money came from the Saudis, the snakes. But nothing could be proved. Anyway, after he became super-rich, he funneled money to terrorists all over the world. Some in law enforcement said he was harboring terrorists right here on American soil.” Nick paused and took a sip, and then he continued. “David had strong connections with the Molinaros too, the Motor City crime family.”

“If he had so much mud on his jacket, then why couldn’t he be arrested?”

“Good question. But no one was ever able to catch him with his hand in the cookie jar. His foreign financial transactions were untraceable. And he is an American citizen, born in America. So, you get the picture.” Nick looked at his wristwatch. “So let me wrap it up here. I have to call the president in just a few minutes. The Molinaros were having a sort of conference in that hotel, and David was going too. And then we got the call.”

“From who?” Doerr asked awkwardly. “The Molinaros?”

“No, dumbass.” Nick checked his watch again, and he stood up. “The FBI. They called me and asked me for help. And we helped them. Actually, *you* did. Good job, my boy.” Nick tapped Doerr’s shoulder and turned to leave. “Now I gotta make a call.”

“Just one last question, sir.”

Nick looked annoyed. “Okay. Make it quick.”

“What happens now?”

“Well, you know how these guys are. They are shaking one hand and fighting with the other hand. David and the Molinaros had their differences. It’s well known, and we have already spread words that the Molinaros got rid of David, and I see no reason why the world should not believe that. Now I think the Molinaros will fold some of their operations and keep a low profile till the dust settles. And the FBI can take credit for cutting crime in Detroit. So everyone is happy. Now…”

Before Nick could finish his sentence, a man came out of one of the rooms with a phone in one hand. “Sir, the president is on line one. He is quite pissed. Says he has been waiting for your call.”

Doerr looked at Nick, whose cheeks were turning pink and eyes cloudy. “Thanks, sir. And good luck with that.” Doerr jerked his head toward the phone and then walked out.

All that had happened fifteen years back. Since then, he had killed many who were deemed to be the enemies by the CIA. He had done assassination jobs all over the world, including the one in the Caribbean. One of his jobs was on Playa Juanillo Beach, in the Dominican Republic. That was how he knew the place so well.

After twelve long years of service in the intelligence, Doerr had quit the agency out of disgust for politics, and it was around that time he had met Gayle and had taken an editing job in New York.

CHAPTER 2

It was nine fifteen p.m. when Doerr reached his two-bedroom apartment on Seventy-First Street. He unlocked the door, and as he entered, he saw Gayle sitting in front of the TV with sleepy eyes. She stood up as Doerr gave her an empty stare. When he came back to the living room after changing his clothes, Gayle looked ready to hit the bed.

"How was your day, hon?" she asked.

"Okay," Doerr said with an expressionless face. "Nothing special."

"I have the day off tomorrow."

"Nice." He sat down on the sofa.

For a minute, they watched the news on TV. "Now that you talk so little, I don't know what I'll do, sitting home alone the whole day."

"Go to the mall or something."

"No, I don't like shopping anymore. Should I go to the police station and see if they've made any progress?"

"No," Doerr said. "I've already been there three times this week. I think we should let them do their job. You look sleepy. Perhaps you should go to bed."

A few minutes later, Gayle heeded his suggestion and headed for bed.

The next morning, Gayle woke up in Max's arms. It was nine a.m. and unusual for her to wake up so late. She was an early rising girl; her routine included getting up at seven, dashing through the bathroom, and then rushing to the train station to catch the 7:35 Line Six train to Grand Central. Once there, she would then switch to a Line Two train and be at her cubicle by 8:45. The IT job often forced her to work unsocial hours.

But today was different. She shifted down a little and pressed her head against Doerr's shoulder, waking him up. "Morning, Max," she said.

"Morning." Doerr lifted his hand to massage her breast. "Sorry, I've been a little cold lately."

"It's okay." She caressed his back. "I know what you're going through. I feel bad too. Billy was such a good kid." She choked.

AFTER DOERR HAD left for work, Gayle settled down with a book. Her phone rang. It was her mom.

"I have some news for you."

“What is it, Mom?”
“Are you ready?”
“Yes.” Gayle knew her mom liked to create drama, so she patiently waited.
“Okay, here it is. Max was not Billy’s father.”
“Come on, Mom,” Gayle said. “I know you don’t like him. But to make up something like this…”
“I’m serious, Gayle. I checked with Health Department. Billy’s father is someone called Jeff Donarski.”
“Are you sure you searched for the right Billy?” It didn’t seem right to Gayle. Doerr never wanted to discuss his first marriage, which she understood. He had told her that he had personally cared for Billy for years, since his first wife had died twelve years back.
“Yes, Billy Donarski,” her mom replied, “date of birth April third, 1990. Later, his name was changed to Billy Doerr.”
“How can it be?”
“I know how it can be, he’s a liar. Maybe he has a life insurance policy on Billy tucked away somewhere.”
“Mom!”
“I think you should confront him tonight.” Her mom gave her verdict. “If you want, I’ll go there and ask for myself.”
“There’s no need, Mom. I’ll ask him when the time is right. He’s going through a lot.”
A few minutes later, Gayle hung up. She looked outside and watched the cars and buses passing by. Gayle thought about what her mom had said all day; she couldn’t shake the topic from her mind.
When Doerr came home late, she was still vacillating over whether to confront him. “How was work today?” she asked curtly.
“Nothing new,” he said as he took his shirt off.
“Let me take that.” She took the shirt and threw it in the hamper.
She looked at his tired face and decided to postpone the confrontation for another day. Like many nights, Doerr went in the bathroom and Gayle hit the bed; she had to go to work early the next day.

AFTER FINISHING HIS dinner, Doerr wiped his face with a white paper towel and decided to join Gayle in bed. Since Billy’s sudden death, he had been in so much distress that he hadn’t had a really long talk with her for a

while. He entered the bedroom, and without turning the light on, he slid under the blanket, wrapped his long arms around her and asked, “Enjoy your day off?”
“Sort of.” She sounded sad. “I had a lot of things to do.”
“Like what?” he asked jokingly. “Shopping for dresses and lipsticks?”
“No, I didn’t go shopping…I was busy.”
“I can’t believe that. You didn’t go shopping on your day off? It’s like me not logging in to the Internet on my day off. What else did you do?”
She said nothing for a few seconds. “My mom called.”
Doerr sighed. He had not gotten along with his mother-in-law from the very beginning. He knew she had been against Gayle marrying him. After their marriage, the relationship between Doerr and his mother-in-law had only deteriorated. “What did you guys talk about?”
“Nothing.”
“Nothing?” He drew her closer and laughed. “How is that possible?”
“Not much, I guess.” She paused again. “Let me ask you, Max. Have you always been truthful to me?”
“Of course, what kind of question is that?” He raised his head. “What’s wrong, dear?”
“Nothing.”
“Oh, I know. She said something bad about me. Didn’t she?”
“Don’t talk like that, Max.” She moved her hand over his back, up his neck and massaged gently.
“Sorry.”
“How are you dealing with everything? Is work okay?”
“It’s fine.” Doerr sighed. “Every day someone seems to be getting murdered in the city. I don’t know when NYPD will find the bastard who killed Billy. I don’t know if they will find the man at all.”
“I know you’re very sad. But don’t worry.” She patted his hair. “They will find Billy’s killer. It’s only a matter of time.”
“I don’t know, dear. As the days are going by, my hopes are receding. In 2009, the NYPD solved only fifty-nine percent of all murders, which means nearly half the killers got away.”
They lay on the bed for a few minutes, in a loose embrace. “How is *your* work?” Doerr asked gently.
“My work? Every day poses a new problem. The Indian guy at work keeps harassing me, and the Russian guy questions everything I do. But enough

about my work." She raised her head and pressed her lips against his.
He moved his head away. "Sorry. I'm just not in the mood."
She sank her head back into the pillow. "Can I ask you a question?"
"Sure."
"Was there a life insurance policy for Billy?"
"No. I thought of getting one many times, but I never quite had the time."

DOERR WOKE UP to a bright sunny day; the temperature was just a shade above eighty. Gayle had left for work already. While brushing his teeth in the bathroom, he saw Billy's toothbrush. Painfully, he gathered Billy's stuff – his brush, razor, deodorant and his fragrances – and put them in a bag and tucked the bag under the bed in Billy's room. He had already given away all of his son's clothes and shoes to a Goodwill store and had dropped Billy's books at the local library.
Doerr warmed up the coffee Gayle had left in the pot, smeared cream cheese on a bagel, and ate it. He put on his office clothes and headed for the NYPD Nineteenth Precinct office, which was located eight blocks from their apartment.
There, Doerr talked to the male receptionist and was soon seated across from Matt Miller, the detective assigned to Billy's case.
"Any progress with the case?" Doerr asked.
"Yes." Miller put one hand next to the laptop he glanced at from time to time. "We identified a tall white man. Forensics has confirmed from the security tape that the man exited the building right around the time Billy took his last breath. The surprising thing is that there is no sign of him entering the building. He either lived in the building or he made an entry through somewhere other than the main door."
Doerr knew that the killer could not be living in the same building. It was too cockamamie to be true. "Can I see the picture of the man?"
"That's the other thing, Mr. Doerr. That man wore a large cap and kept his face down. The visuals are almost useless. Then there is another suspect. There is a man who has been reported to be stalking young boys in the area. He is missing, and we are trying to locate him."
"That's all you have?" Doerr asked rudely.
"Yes." The officer's face became expressionless. He straightened up on his chair and picked up the water bottle from the table. "Do you suspect

anybody?"
"Not really. But there was this guy – his name is Jamie. He picked fights with Billy many times about some girl. He threatened to kill Billy a few times, if he ever spoke to her again. A paranoid boy, it seems."
"Okay, we'll check him out," Miller said.
Doerr looked at Miller. It did not appear to him that Miller would be doing whole lot to go after Jamie.
I'll have to go after Jamie myself, Doerr thought and left the NYPD office.

IN THE AFTERNOON, Doerr was busy with work.
He decided to call Billy's school to get Jamie's phone number, the boy who used to harass Billy. Doerr had seen Jamie before – on the basketball court and the football field. He was a strong boy who always had an angry posture.
The school said they could not give out Jamie's number, a privacy issue, but the school was having a sports event next weekend, and Jamie was certainly going to be there.
"Thank you." Doerr hung up and looked vacantly through the window.
Doerr remembered the days when Billy had lost his mother and Doerr's CIA job had kept him away from his son, leaving Billy with Doerr's aging mother.
Doerr felt a burn in his chest thinking about those days, when Billy had come running to him at the sound of his homecoming. He had always tried to spend as much time as possible with his son, knowing very well that their time together was fleeting. Always, though, he had to return to his assignments. He had placed work ahead of everything else.
But what had he received in return?

THE NEXT WEEKEND, Doerr attended the school sports event where he knew Jamie would be present, a football game with a rival school. More than a thousand spectators gathered around the field, ready to scream and cheer for their favorite team. Doerr saw Jamie warming up at the far end of the field. With all the padding and the white and green silky jersey, he looked even bigger than he really was.

The game started. Jamie was a wide receiver but could hardly hold passes thrown at him. At halftime, his team was trailing ten to twenty-four. Doerr saw Jamie spit on the field on his way out.
Doerr rushed over and stood in Jamie's path. When he was close enough, Doerr called, "Hey, Jamie."
Jamie didn't recognize Doerr.
"Remember me?" Doerr stepped in front of Jamie and asked. "I'm Billy's dad."
"What do you want?" Jamie asked rudely and continued to walk.
"Where were you on July fifteenth?" Doerr asked.
"Why you ask?"
Jamie was walking away, and Doerr stepped in right behind him. "That's when Billy was killed. July fifteenth. You threatened to kill him so many times."
Jamie turned around. "You mean to say I killed Billy somehow?"
"Yes, that's what I'm saying."
"You gotta be kidding." Jamie took his shoulder pads off and continued to walk.
"Answer the question, Jamie. Where were you on the night of the fifteenth of July?"
"Actually, Mr. Doerr, I don't remember where I was that night. Maybe I was with a girl. Maybe I killed Billy." Jamie raised his helmet. "What are you going to do about it? Huh?"
"Bastard. I'll take you to the police and put you in jail." Doerr grabbed Jamie's neck, and he felt like choking him.
Just then, Doerr felt somebody's hands on his own neck, and the man pulled him away from Jamie. Doerr looked behind him. It was a middle-aged, burly man. A handful of other folks were staring at him as well.
"Dad," Jamie said as he kicked the ground, "this man was harassing me, says I killed Billy. Then he grabbed me. This man is crazy."
The burly man released Doerr and stood in front of him. "You like to rough up young men? Next time you touch him I'll kill you."
"Your son might have murdered my son, and he won't say where he was that night!"
"And you think that makes him a killer! You know I can have you charged with assault right now?"
Doerr knew the man was right. Exhaling heavily, he walked away.

CHAPTER 3

Gayle returned home from work in the evening. She pushed through the door and could not wait to get out of her pants suit. The summer was hot, and by the end of July there were many hundred-degree-plus days. Her whole body was sweaty from walking to and from the train stations. After switching into shorts and a sleeveless top, she headed for the bathroom. On the way, she heard the beep from the phone. There was a message. She ignored it, continuing to the bathroom to wash up. While checking her face, she noticed a wrinkle on her forehead. Was that due to age, tension, what? She rubbed her hand over it and tried to straighten it out. It came back as soon as she released it. A sigh followed. Things seemed to be going downhill for her. After Billy's death, Max had changed a lot. He hardly talked; he didn't want to go out, not even on weekends. He had immersed himself in his books, newspapers, and magazines. He had been cutting out pieces from newspapers and magazines and storing them in a manila folder. She had seen him doing that before, but now he was doing it almost compulsively.

Is he going crazy? She asked herself. *Losing a kid is hard, even harder if it's the only child.*

She knew he wouldn't go to a shrink to talk about it, so trying to talk him into it was pointless.

She came out of the bathroom and opened the fridge to make a sandwich, the phone still beeping. She put the bread and the mayo down on the kitchen counter and hit the play button on the phone. It was a message for Max, from a man who introduced himself as Samuel. And the message was strange too. "I've got a job for you that will make a lot of people happy. The pay is very good. Call me."

The caller id was 'unknown.' She kept wondering – who was this guy? What was the job? She had never met a friend of Max named Samuel. In fact, she had met very few who Max called friends. On their wedding day, only two of his friends had shown up, and one had left embarrassingly early.

Gayle made her sandwich, sat on the sofa, and started eating. Outside, it was getting dark.

She had met Max three years ago at a friend's place. "What do you do?" she had asked after small talk.

“I work at the CIA,” he hushed.
“Yeah?” She had been sure it was a joke. “What are you working on right now?”
“We aren’t supposed to say. Maybe I’m working on you,” Doerr had said and flashed a cocky smile.
From the way he had talked and behaved, she had been sure he did some kind of professional job. By the time their relationship got serious, she knew he was working as an editor, working mostly on crime stories, of which there was no shortage in the city.
One day she had visited him at his newspaper office. He sat in a tiny cubicle; three phones, two computers and a pile of papers lay on his table. Numerous pieces of papers and pictures were pinned to the fabric panel of the cubicle wall. But he never wanted to talk about his work.
“What is there to talk about? My job is all about killers and thieves,” Doerr had quipped once. “Let’s keep them out of our lives.”

WHEN DOERR GOT out of the sports arena, it was already eight thirty. He took the subway train on Line Six. The city duelers were carrying themselves back to their houses, apartments and condos on tired legs, to bury the frustrations of the day and hoping for a better day to come. For Doerr, it would take another forty minutes to get home. Gayle’s sleeping face swam in his head.
The lumbering train reached his destination; the station was empty, except for the people who had just got off, and they left as quickly as the departing train. Sauntering across the platform, Doerr found himself alone, and it felt good. Most people would feel uncomfortable to be in a deserted New York station at this hour, but not him. Empty places gave him security. Solitude was not only longed for, its security was trained into the intelligence recruits right from the beginning. Solitude meant no shadow, no shooter, no follower – no nothing.
As he walked down a narrow road that could barely accommodate one sedan, he remembered how his job had started. He had been in his senior year at Cornell University. On a rainy day, he had been practicing for his hundred-meter track race, alone. He had run four laps when a man appeared. The man looked odd, a little short, wearing a shiny suit. The size

of his barely contained belly was exceeded only by that of the umbrella he was holding.
Doerr stood up from his crouching position, curious, maybe a little cautious, but certainly not afraid. He had no reason to be. He was a strong, muscled man, who many in his class feared. The bulky man had walked up to him and introduced himself. “Hi, young chap, I’m Ted. I’m a recruiter from the CIA and looking for able men like you to serve our great country.”

AS HE KEPT walking toward his apartment, he felt the ache in his chest again. Billy’s death crushed him from inside. The killer might well have been an old enemy from his former profession, and there was no shortage of enemies in his previous work. He had stepped on so many thugs, terrorists, agents, politicians, and lobbyists. He thought it was best not to divulge the details of his past work to Gayle, to protect her. Hiding things in his marriage was painful to him.
Words reverberated from one side of his heart to the other. He could never tell Gayle the details of how many men he had killed, how many could be looking for him. It would scare her; their relationship might change. It could dry the core of her love, but holding so many details inside himself was painful too.
Three minutes later, the brown-painted, sixteen-level apartment building appeared in his view. He made the decision; he would tell her everything. How he had worked at the CIA for thirteen years and why he had to leave: everything. He didn’t care about anything anymore. He glanced at his watch; it was ten p.m. Gayle would be sound asleep. There was no point in waking her up. He would maybe tell her next weekend, or the weekend after, but certainly not tonight.
Standing in the nearly dark hallway, when he opened his apartment door, he expected a dark living room; Gayle always turned the lights off before heading for bed. Instead, he was almost blinded by the large halogen lamp standing next to the door, and he squinted around looking for Gayle. She was sitting on the sofa, her face gloomy.
Doerr asked, “Are you having to work in the middle of the night again?” Gayle’s IT work at the bank often required her to work late at night and sometimes through the night entirely. That usually happened when there

was a problem with the banking software or when a new version of the software was being installed.

“No,” Gayle said and stood up. “I just wasn’t getting any sleep.”

“Why, dear?” Doerr touched her cheek. “Are you okay?”

“Can I ask you something, Max?”

“Sure.”

“Have you always been truthful to me about everything?” She stood inches away from him, her eyes fixed on his. “Who is Samuel? And was Billy really your son?”

Doerr sighed. “Okay, I must confess I have not told you lots of things, but I haven’t lied to you. Maybe I should have told you about my previous job a long time ago, and now *I will*. But can it wait till Saturday?”

“Tell me everything now.” Gayle sat down on the sofa. “Come here. Sit down.”

Doerr looked at Gayle. “Okay, just give me two minutes to change, and I’ll tell you everything.” He headed for the bathroom. He changed into pajamas and then came back to the sofa. The lights were bright, and Gayle’s eyes were peering at him.

“Okay, just hear me out, all right?” said Doerr.

“Okay.” Gayle scooted over slightly.

“When I was a senior in college,” Doerr sat down and started talking, “a man named Ted approached me. He was a recruiter for the CIA. He told me I would be a good candidate for them. I had the right combination of muscle and intellect that they look for; that’s what I was told. He said the money wouldn’t be good initially, but that would change after a few years. I would have to go through a year’s intensive training at Langley, followed by two years of apprenticeship under a senior agent.

“I always wanted to serve my country. As I was finishing my education, that urge only got stronger. I wasn’t sure how I would do it, though. After Ted told me everything, I wasn’t sure if joining the CIA was the right way to go. I thought about it for days. My dad had died from cancer, and I couldn’t discuss it with my mom. Being their only child, I knew Mom would have freaked out. Ted forbade me to discuss the matter with anyone, anyway. After a week, after swearing my buddy Frank to secrecy – I asked for his opinion.

“Frank said, ‘You’ll get killed, dude, and no one will even know.’” Doerr continued. “Strangely, that statement gave me courage and enthusiasm. My

father was in the Marines, and I wasn't afraid to die.
"The first year of training went fine. It was fun, I made lots of friends, and later, that came in handy. I had to shadow a senior agent for only a year before getting an independent assignment. My first assignment was in Belarus. I got bored within three months, and they sent me to Libya. And that was when the real action started.
"Within three years I was promoted to senior agent; I had my own team, but I liked to do the field work myself. Lazarus West, my boss, said to me once, 'I never saw a senior agent so young.' I was twenty-six. One of my skills was sniping down targets, and I was quite good at that. Some said I was one of the best snipers they produced. Some called me 'the assassin.'"
"I remember you said you worked at the CIA, the first day we met," Gayle said. "I thought that was just a joke."
"No," Doerr corrected her. "I was truthful. The day I saw you first I was sort of spellbound, and the truth came out naturally. Maybe I should have told you everything in detail back then.
"But I wasn't allowed to tell you everything, and even now I can't tell you all the details of my job, but I will give you the gist," Doerr said, leaning back on the sofa, legs stretched out in front of him. "It was 2008, a few months before I met you, and our unit had been under attack for a while to cut our budget. It made me very frustrated. I was heading two teams, one in Saudi Arabia and the other in Syria. I had a total of seventy able, dedicated men and women working for me directly or indirectly. I was told to wind down both, which was crazy. We had spent years building relations with the locals.
"When I gave an ultimatum to my boss that we had to keep both teams on-site, he scheduled a meeting with Senator Kubrick. The senator had been reelected in Ohio two years before. He was a member of the budget committee. We believed he had a certain amount of budget at his discretion.
"A week later, my boss, Lazarus, and I were headed for the Capitol. I had been there before, begging for money for our agency. But this time it was different. Not only were the jobs of many I knew in jeopardy, but I felt America's security was threatened by our own people.
"Anyway, we all sat down with the senator to discuss the matter. I pleaded my case, and the senator listened with respect, initially. I said, 'My guys have developed a unique knowledge, we don't want to lose it; it will take a long time to build it from scratch again.' The senator's demeanor changed,

the smile on his face turned into a frown. He said, 'Listen, wherever there is government, there is indulgence. There is always room to cut funds. I know this, and the American people know this. We have already taken care of the terrorists. We are busting their asses with drones and crashing their hideouts in Afghanistan, Syria, Nigeria and everywhere else.'

"I said, 'With all due respect, sir, there are plenty of threats to America. Hardliners swear their newborn kids to kill Americans the moment they see one. We have–'

"The senator was getting angrier. He interrupted me, '*I* know that there are threats. I'm no fool. But the Saudis are friends, and I strongly feel that we don't need Unit Twelve there anymore. The president wants this to happen.'

"I was shocked, my jaw dropped, and I asked, 'Our president has personally taken the decision to chop my unit?' The senator replied, 'Not directly. Didn't you hear his speech in Ohio? With budget deficit growing like wild mushrooms and our government begging money from the Chinese Premier like a New York beggar, we have to start cutting our spending.'

"I was getting desperate and frustrated at the same time. I said tersely, 'Mr. Kubrick, you have over hundred million under your wing, and my units cost only about two million each…'

"My boss was only prepared to listen so far, and he frowned at me in disapproval and said, 'Max, we don't know what he has or what he controls.'

"The senator turned to Lazarus and said, 'Let him speak. This is what our great country is all about. We all can express ourselves without fear.' Then I asked the same question again. Why was there no money for my units? The senator leaned back and replied, 'We can't spend and spend watching foreign countries, especially the friendly ones like Saudi Arabia. It is time for us to focus on domestic matters. One day before election, standing on a podium at Cleveland, I promised the great people of Ohio that there would be a fast rail connection between Cleveland and Columbus, one day. I *have* to keep that promise. You know how long these fucking projects take? If we start this year, it will be completed in 2014.'

"I knew the senator would be due for reelection in 2014, good timing for him."

Gayle was listening with her mouth agape. "Then what happened?"

"I sadly realized how cold politicians could be. They were ready to compromise national security for a piece of pork. I had read about that fast

train project. It was estimated that less than a hundred people a day would ride that route, if it were ever built. I was sad and angry. I felt that I could not get my men what they needed. I felt betrayed. I stood up and blurted something at the senator and left. I would come to know later that the senator didn't take that lightly.

"The next day, when I met Lazarus, he asked me to apologize to the senator or resign. So I gave my resignation."

Doerr looked into Gayle's eyes. "This was in September 2008. I had met you two months before." Gayle nodded, and Doerr continued. "I am sorry I didn't tell you everything before. But I made a promise to myself on New Year's Day in 2009, when we skated together on the ice in Central Park, to never lie to you or withhold anything knowingly, except about my CIA past. I'm sure I just broke some of their code of conduct by telling you those details. But I don't care."

Doerr glanced at his watch. It was 12:10 a.m. He had been tired when he had reached home. After talking for over an hour, he felt even more so. "Do you have any other questions?"

Gayle hesitated and then said, "Just one more."

"What is it?"

"Was Billy your biological son?"

Doerr sighed. He never talked about his first marriage. But he wanted to get over it. "All right, I will tell you everything. I met Sally during my first year of training. It was love at first sight for me. We met through a common friend. Billy was Sally's son from an unfortunate teen pregnancy. It didn't bother me at all. At that time, she was attending school to earn a degree in Mass Communication, and Billy was being taken care of by his grandmother. We dated for a year, and then, after I had finished the operation in Lybia, I proposed. She said yes, and after our wedding I took a month off. Together we went on a month-long tour – SanFran, Yellowstone, and Las Vegas. It felt like we were in heaven.

"A few years passed by. She was busy with school, and I was busy with my job. We were together whenever I was home. Neither I nor Sally was interested in having another child. Then the worst day for our family came in June 1999. It was a Tuesday; I picked up Billy from daycare and reached home around seven p.m. I got a call from the police. Sally had been killed in a car accident. A truck rammed into her compact car and sent it into a tumble.

“After her death I legally adopted Billy and changed his name. There wasn’t a single day I thought he wasn’t my son.”
Gayle placed her hand on his shoulder. “I don’t know what to say. I’m sorry I made you go through all this.”
“Don’t worry. I was going to tell you soon, anyway. But I’m happy that I did it tonight. I feel relieved. Why don’t you go to bed; you’ve got work tomorrow.”

THE NEXT MORNING, Doerr woke up late, as usual. He was surprised to see Gayle was still home.
“Good thing you took a day off,” he said. “You needed it.”
They had their breakfast together. Doerr chomped a large piece of bacon, and his gaze fell on Gayle’s gloomy face.
He figured out what it was. Because of him, she was under so much stress, and he knew her mom was always urging her to spend some time with her. He suggested that she go and spend a few days with her mom, maybe a few weeks; after all, she had a fairly stressful job.
“No way,” she said and put her coffee mug down. “And leave you here in this situation? Never.”
“I’ll be fine. Remember, I’m trained to endure much harsher conditions. Trust me.”
“If I go, who will take care of you? Who will make your morning coffee, and who will wash your laundry? I can’t go.”
“No, please go. I can’t see you suffer with me. Go to your mother’s. I will still be sad, and pain will cover my heart. But apart, our pain will be less. Do it for me. Please.” In his mind, Doerr still felt that she would be in less pain if she stayed with her mother for a while.
After more persuasion, she agreed to go to her mom’s place. “I don’t know how jolly I’ll be at my mother’s. I won’t be able to stop thinking about you. I hope you’ll be able to think clearly and not worry about me when I’m gone,” she said. “By the way, someone named Samuel left a voicemail for you.”

CHAPTER 4

SAMUEL. THE NAME struck him like a broken note from the Mozart symphony number forty, which Doerr often played on his Yamaha piano to cool down his nerves. Samuel was a CIA colleague who many people had avoided, though many people had loved him as well. Samuel had done weird things. Behind his back, many had talked foul of him, but no one dared to say it to his face. He was a tall man with broad shoulders and a distinctive, deep scar on his right cheek, which made him look even more masculine.

Days after walking out on the senator and losing most of his privileges, Doerr had wished he had Samuel by his side to smooth out the tension that had filled the air when he had decided to resign from the agency. By the time Samuel had called him, he had already handed in his resignation letter and lost even the simplest privileges that even a junior agent used to have. He wanted to forget about Samuel. Samuel's memory only brought back the past, the painful past. Doerr walked to the piano and started playing. As his fingers danced across the keys, he could feel his stress levels decreasing. But, after a few minutes, he wasn't sure if the music was relieving or bringing back the pain. He stood up, determined not to check the voicemail; he entered the bathroom and started a long cold shower. When he came out, it was already twelve p.m., time for him to head for work.

WHEN HE ARRIVED back to his empty home late that night, he went straight to his piano. He switched it to silent mode; as he pressed the minor keys, he felt emptiness in his chest that the symphony could not fill. He played for a few more minutes, and then he poured himself a glass of red wine. After drinking it quickly, he poured another. The resulting dizziness made him rush to the phone. He was about to dial Gayle's number, but he stopped. He didn't want to transfer his stress to her.

It had been a while since he had slept alone. He poured another refill of wine into the glass. As the red liquid danced inside the glass, it brought back the memory of Billy as a toddler, running around the house, and the days when he had taken care of him all by himself. Alcohol ran down his esophagus, spreading the pain all around his body. That was when he walked to the base of the landline phone and hit the play button.

Doerr heard the message and was confused by it.
Samuel’s message did not leave a number to call back. It was late at night, but Doerr called a few friends and finally found Samuel’s number. He immediately dialed it. “Hello, Samuel?”
After pleasantries, Samuel asked, “How are things? Are you happy with an editor’s desk job?”
“What can I say?” Doerr decided not to mention the family tragedy. “It pays the bills. I wanted out of the agency, and I *am* out.”
“That bastard, Lazarus, gave you such a raw deal. If I were you, I would have sued the hell out of him.”
“Maybe I should have.” Doerr knew very well that the agency could not be sued, let alone one of its employees. “So what is this job you left me a message about?”
“Right, right. The thing is…if you’re not too busy,” Samuel paused; the sound of a beverage entering a glass could be heard on the line. Samuel was known to be a hard drinker. “You know the CIA has been trying to outsource some of the dirty work lately. Five years back, this would have been called ludicrous. But they’re pushing us to the brink. Do you think the job of a well-trained agent can be done by anyone else? Israeli or British Intelligence – maybe. Mossad or MI6. Anyway, we have to hire someone for three specific jobs. One in Europe, one in Asia and one right here in America. The jobs require some specific skills. I think you are the right candidate. I would like to have you back at the agency; the CIA never produced a better sniper than you. We all know that.”
“But what do I get?” Doerr said in a surly voice. He took his shirt off and held the cordless phone close to his ear.
“Depending on how things go, you could get your job back. You may get all the unpaid benefits – that could amount to over hundred grand.”
“I don’t care about the money.” Doerr took a sip of his wine. “Give me the details of the job, and I’ll think about it.”
“It’s getting late. I will be in the big city this Saturday. Why don’t we meet at our favorite bar, by Thirty-Third Street? You haven’t forgotten about that place, have you?”
“How could I forget? We met there a million times.”
“All right then. Let’s meet on Saturday around, say, seven?”
“Okay. See you then.”

“And by the way, two other old buddies will be there. It will be a nice get-together for the agency men.”
“All right.”

THE DOORLESS, NONDESCRIPT entrance to the shabby building on Thirty-Third Street gave the impression that it was perhaps a drug joint. The cracks on the concrete stairs told passersby that it did not hold the corporate house of any healthy business. If any visitor decided to check it out, they would be first greeted with a ‘PRIVATE PROPERTY’ sign at the turn of the stairs. At the next turn, the intruder would read a second sign – ‘DO NOT ENTER, VIOLATORS PROSECUTED.’ If anyone dared to pass those signs and proceed upstairs, four heavily armed men of huge proportion would confront them. The men wouldn’t listen to any lame excuse and would send the startled visitor back down the stairs in less than thirty seconds. They were authorized to use force to keep people out. But that was never necessary.
Doerr had gone upstairs there many times. In fact, his second meeting with his recruiter, Ted, had occurred there, on the seventeenth floor, the floor reserved for human resources. All twenty-three levels of the building were used by the agency. Each floor had its own security guards, and there was eight-inch-thick glass on the wall where windows were supposed to be installed. The specially made glass was designed to protect from bullets and even small missiles. No one could see anything from outside, but they still dressed the windows with white blinds.
As Doerr passed by the building, he glanced at the entrance. It looked the same as it had when he had gone there the first time, deserted and desolate, heartless and lonely. A homeless man sat next to the entrance, begging for quarters. Doerr put his hand in his pocket, pulled out a five-dollar note and gave the money to the beggar. He walked two more blocks till he reached Susie’s Bar, the old favorite meeting place.
It was seven p.m., and the place was already getting crowded. There were about twenty tables, but none of them were empty. All the stools around the bar were occupied too. Doerr looked around for Samuel but was unable to locate him. He glanced at a young man at the corner table, who was sipping his beer, seated uncomfortably between two older men, one of whom had a

dense beard. Doerr kept walking and then turned, hearing his name. Samuel and two other guys were seated on three stools facing the bar.
Doerr recognized the other two men; one man's name was Victor, but he didn't remember the other man's name.
"Hey, Max." Victor stood up and extended his hand for a shake; he leaned in and bumped chests with Doerr as his thick brown beard touched Doerr's shoulder. "It's a shame that we live in the same damn city and don't even meet once a year."
"Sorry, I've been busy," Doerr greeted him.
After more pleasantries and ordering drinks, Doerr stood talking to his old buddies. With his wife gone, in some way it felt like he was regressing back to the past. Feeling uneasy, he looked straight at Samuel and asked, "When are we going to discuss business?"
"Let's just enjoy tonight," Samuel said as he raised his beer bottle, "with these wonderful guys." He pointed to Victor and the other man.
"Okay." It made sense to Doerr. This noisy place wasn't suitable for business anyway. Some sort of dance music was blaring through the air. Conveniently, two men beside the group finished their drinks and left; Doerr sat down on one of the vacated stools and settled in next to his friends. The four men sat there, drinking and enjoying the Yankees baseball game that was being shown on the seventy-two-inch plasma TV.
After a while, Doerr said, "Walking by that building on Thirty-Third Street gave me a chill down my legs. It brought back so many memories."
"But don't go there. Many floors have been leased out," Samuel said. "And you know how we operate. If you're not within their operation, you're as good as an outsider."
Doerr nodded. "I know."
They kept watching TV, drinking and talking. Before he knew it, a few hours had passed by.
It was getting late. Doerr glanced at his watch – 11:50 p.m.
"How long are we gonna stay?" he asked.
"Let's enjoy it, man! Night is young," Samuel said. "What have you got to do at home?"
Doerr knew he was right. Another hour passed by; the crowd thinned out, and the laughs waned. Other than him and his friends, only three other customers remained to enjoy their drinks. A single bartender, looking tired, was taking care of business.

Doerr’s eyes drifted to the mirror on the wall. In the reflection, he saw a thin figure appear at the door. Doerr was shocked to see a gun in the man’s hand. The gunman sprinted within five feet of Doerr. Raising the gun, the man pointed it directly at Doerr’s head.

“Give me your wallet!” the man yelled.

Doerr turned and looked straight at the skinny man’s black mask.

“Give me your fucking wallet or everyone here dies,” the man shouted again and raised the gun a few inches higher.

Shocked, Doerr reached into his pocket, pulled out his wallet and glanced at Samuel. Samuel looked like he was waiting for him to hand over the wallet and end the confrontation.

Doerr extended his hand to give him the wallet. The gunman inched forward, expecting to grab the black leather wallet. Doerr took one step, swinging his right hand up, hitting the man’s lower jaw. The noise of crashing teeth was audible, even over the music. Doerr moved his left hand with supersonic speed to snatch the gun from the thug’s hand. But the son of a bitch had good reflexes; he pulled his arm away and then hit Doerr in the face with the butt of the gun. But Doerr was not to be outdone. He hit the mugger’s right elbow, and the gun flew out of his hand.

The masked man stood there, stunned, but only for a second, before sprinting off like a startled deer. Doerr ran after him, but the thief ran into the darkness of Gotham City, and Doerr could not see him. On the way back to the bar, he touched his face and felt the warm blood there.

Once back in the bar, Samuel looked at him with a big smile. “You saved everyone today.”

“It was nothing,” Doerr said. “I don’t know why he came to me. I mean, there were others.”

“I don’t know either,” Samuel replied. “Maybe because you were closest to the door.”

The bartender came up and showed appreciation. “You’re my hero. We get thugs like that coming in once in a while. We installed a security camera, but the bastards have adapted, and now they wear masks. Now, tell me, what drink would you like as thanks?”

“Nothing,” Doerr said, feeling tired from fighting and running. “No, thanks. I should be going.”

“No way,” Samuel said, “let’s celebrate. Everyone wants to spend time with a hero like you.” He turned to Victor and the other man. “Right, guys?”

“Yeah,” Victor and the other man shouted together.
Samuel turned to the bartender, who was still staring at Doerr with admiration. Samuel said to him, “Get him a Grey Goose vodka with orange juice. And get the first-aid kit, will you?”
“Right away, sir.” The bartender went back behind the bar.
When he came back with the kit, Doerr put a Band-Aid over the cut on his face. “I really need to go,” Doerr said with a serious voice. “Goodbye, fellas,” he said and left.
He walked a few blocks and again passed the building on Thirty-Third Street. This time, however, he did not think of his past profession, which may soon become his line of work again. He was thinking about Gayle. His heart ached; he doubted whether sending her away was the right decision.

CHAPTER 5

The following morning, Doerr opened his eyes as the phone blared; sunlight broke through the white blinds, infusing just enough light for him to see the cordless phone lying on the corner table. He extended his right hand and picked it up.

It was Samuel. “Good morning, buddy.”

“Good morning.” Doerr was sleepy; years of working late at the newspaper had given him the bad habit of sleeping late. “I was expecting your call, but not so early.”

“Hey, you passed the test.”

“What test?”

“Remember the guy with the gun at the bar.” Samuel laughed. “He was our guy. I sent him to make sure you haven’t lost your reflexes after years of working a desk job at the newspaper.”

“First of all, I don’t have a desk job. Secondly, why the hell did you send someone to hurt me?” Doerr sat up and became angry. “What if I’d really got hurt? The guy took a big swing with his gun.”

“I knew you would take care of him and pass. Besides, Victor and I were there. But I knew you would do the job, as you always did. I want you back, Max. Can I have your word?”

Doerr calmed but said nothing. He pondered whether he should tell Samuel about his precarious family situation.

“Max?” Samuel said.

“Yeah, sorry. Let me think about it. I’ll get back to you in a few days.”

“Okay, the official letters will be mailed out to you on Monday.”

DOERR WAS THINKING over a lot of things. He still could not make up his mind whether to rejoin the CIA, back where he had once been humiliated. He wondered if he would have worked for the CIA at all if someone other than the kind old man, Ted, had approached him. Now that he was seriously considering rejoining the agency, the fond memories of his obese mentor came back.

“You have to learn how to be beaten,” Ted had said one day.

“What?” Doerr was surprised. “I thought we’re supposed to straighten out the bad guys.”

“Do you know how many able guys the agency loses every year?” Ted had said, smiling.
“How many?”
“Tens, sometimes over a hundred in a year. Guys get kidnaped, shot, ambushed. It happens all the time. So you have to know how to be beaten, then stay alive. If this scares you, I would suggest you reconsider whether you will join us.”
The pep talk had given him the final push to become a spook. His own father had died from cancer when Doerr was sixteen. Ted had seemed like a father figure when Doerr started at the agency. But the relationship had tapered off over time. Now, three long years after quitting, he wanted to talk to Ted. In fact, he was desperate to speak to Ted. After scanning through his contact list, he came up with Ted’s home number.
The old man would certainly provide the right advice. He dialed the number.
“Hello,” a faint woman’s voice answered.
“Can I talk to Ted?”
The woman at the other end didn’t say anything.
“Hello? Hello?” Doerr said.
“Ted,” the woman finally replied in a broken voice. “Ted died last year.”
“What? How? How did it happen?”
The woman once again remained silent. Doerr realized that he was talking to Ted’s grief-stricken widow.
“Don’t say anything. I was a big fan of Ted,” Doerr said. “I want to talk to you in person. I’ll come and visit you tomorrow if that’s okay with you.”
“Okay,” she replied and gave an address in Rochester, New York.
Doerr realized he would have to drive for eight hours to get there by the evening. He dialed Rent-A-Car’s number to book an early morning pickup.

THE SUN WAS coming out of its night-long slumber, and the dark tarp over the sky was lifted. Doerr held the steering wheel straight with both hands. The rented red Ford Focus trudged forward at sixty-eight miles an hour, cutting through the air that was getting ready to warm itself up. He had a long drive ahead.
When he drove along Highway 490 West into a Rochester suburb, it was a little past six p.m. During the whole trip, he had kept wondering how Ted

could have died. *Was it his obese body that revolted against him or an accident? Or was it an enemy's bullet? That couldn't be it,* he thought. *Ted wasn't a field agent.*

Guided by the GPS, Doerr reached Ted's house at six thirty. He parked his car on the roadside and walked toward the door.

The pinkish petals of the magnolia in front of the white-shingled house seemed to smile to him. He walked over the grass, reached the door and pressed the doorbell once, and then two more times.

A thin woman, wearing a purple blouse, opened the white wooden door slowly. She was slim.

"I'm Max." He extended his hand. "I called yesterday."

The woman took his hand. "Janice. Please, come in."

She showed him inside the house and asked, "Do you want something to drink?"

"No, thank you." He sat down on the sofa. "I was fairly close to Ted, at one time."

She sat opposite him, her legs crossed. She looked at her knees and said, "He never mentioned your name."

Doerr understood that Ted had recruited many people to the agency. He could not have mentioned each recruit to his wife. Doerr looked straight at her eyes. He wanted to ask how Ted had died, but he could not pose the question.

The widow stared at the brown carpet for perhaps five seconds and then looked up. "He went to Venezuela. They needed to put some moles in Hugo Chavez's inner circle. Ted thought he would be the right person. I forbade him." She paused.

Doerr could see the glistening layer of moisture forming over her eyes. He waited.

"But he didn't listen." She wiped the tears off. "He went to Caracas. He emailed about how beautiful the city was, sent me photos. Later I came to know he had gone to the inner city to hire someone who had close contact with a minister. The source was a trusted man but turned out to be a double agent. Ted was duped and taken prisoner. But somehow he managed to text the CIA, who were ready with guns and whatnot. Ted broke through the window. Cut his hand and face. His shirt was bloody, the guys told me later. They found him running toward them in an alley." She paused and showed her two fingers, an inch apart. "They were this close to saving him."

“Then what happened?” Doerr asked.
“His weight caught up with him. He stopped to catch his breath. Three local goons, with guns in hand, appeared behind him. The CIA men killed one of the three. But Ted’s huge body was standing in between them, blocking their view. They couldn’t get a good aim. One of the goons raised a gun and shot Ted in the back of the head. He dropped, and the CIA guys released hellfire. All three goons were dead, but so was Ted.”
Doerr was flabbergasted. So many brave men die every year. How shameful it was that men like Ted weren’t worshiped by the American people. Few would know his bravery.
He stood up and placed his hand over hers.

AFTER LEAVING JANICE’S house, he checked into a nearby Days Inn motel. The night seemed darker and longer with Ted’s death lingering in his mind. Doerr felt death was everywhere; it was all pervasive and could reach anyone, at any time. Nobody was safe.
He felt lonely and remembered his old buddy Dan, who had been his classmate at Cornell University. He lived in Buffalo, worked for a large bank, and was single. He called Dan, and his friend insisted that he go over to his house immediately.
Doerr arrived at Dan’s house late in the night. The two friends quickly got reacquainted and settled in for the night, talking, with beer bottles in hand.
“When we meet at the alumni congregation, we always talk about you,” Dan said. “There were always rumors that you joined the CIA. Is that true?”
Doerr avoided that question and asked a counter-question. “Are you happy with what you do?”
“Most of the time. Sometimes it’s a stretch. Where do you work now?”
“I’m between jobs right now.” Doerr wanted to change the topic away from his work. “What is your plan for tomorrow?”
“When was the last time you visited Niagara Falls?”
“About ten years back, I think, maybe even more.”
“Then why don’t we head there tomorrow? We can go to Canada the day after.”
“Niagara Falls sounds good, but I have to head back home late tomorrow.”

THE NEXT MORNING, they were beside the big fall. They rode out on the *Maid of the Mist*. The boat moved slowly toward the bottom of the fall. The roar of the falling water grew louder. The mist thickened and threatened to engulf the vessel. The boat was barely a hundred feet away from the bottom of the fall, where six hundred thousand gallons of water fell every second. The engine came to a halt, and the boat stopped moving. It kept bobbing back and forth. The thick columns of water in the fall made such a deep noise that everything else seemed insignificant. As Doerr held on to the rail to balance himself, unable to see anyone else, he made up his mind. He would return to the CIA and serve his country. People like Ted's work should not go in vain.

When he returned to his New York home, he went straight to the mailbox and pulled out six white envelopes, some junk mail and a large brown envelope. He held the large envelope up and looked at the top left corner – Critical Institute of America. He knew who that envelope was from – the CIA. Twelve years ago he had received exactly the same envelope from Ted.

Once in his apartment, he tore open the envelope. The offer letter had the name Central Intelligence Agency written at the top in golden letters; on the top right was the eagle logo. The salary they were offering was $140,000 per year.

That's generous.

Doerr called Samuel. After pleasantries, he said, "I've made up my mind, Samuel. I'm coming back."

"Good, welcome back, Max. You are a good son of this great country."

"The salary is a bit generous. I wasn't expecting that much," Doerr said.

"That's because your salary has been calculated as if you never left the agency. You deserve it."

"Thanks, Samuel, can we talk about the job now?"

"All right, let's talk business." Samuel laughed.

"Please."

"Your first job will be in Bangkok, in three weeks. This guy, Heherson, from the Philippines, has been hiding there. You need to find him and extract some info. I'm emailing the complete dossier on the bastard. Take a look."

"I will. Bye." Doerr hung up, unbuttoned his shirt, lay down on the sofa and closed his eyes.

He was tired from the long drive and quickly fell asleep. When he woke up, the room was dark. The green alarm clock displayed 9:10 p.m. He felt the sourness in his mouth. He stood up and turned the lights on. The silence in the room was depressing, and he felt lonely.

Better get used to it, he told himself; in Bangkok there wouldn’t be any friends or family, only enemies.

CHAPTER 6

THE UNITED AIR Boeing 747 was full to the brim. If it had one more passenger, the passenger would certainly have had to squat on the floor. As the pilot finished his welcome message, Doerr repositioned himself on the blue, business-class seat. The aircraft took off from La Guardia Airport, and the five-hour-long flight to LAX began.

As the short air hostess brought him a glass of white wine, Doerr opened the dossier on the Filipino man – Heherson – who was his new target. The man was said to be five feet six inches tall and about forty years old. He had a large bald patch on his head, and although he was a man of thin stature, he had a large belly. Heherson had started his career as a drug peddler at the age of fourteen. At sixteen, he had been caught by the police. Due to the country's tough drug laws, his prospects had looked bleak. A judge had spared his life but sentenced him to spend the rest of his life in prison. Heherson spent the next six years in a federal penitentiary, where he met his mentor – a major figure in a terrorist group linked to Abu Sayyaf. Heherson and his mentor broke out of jail, along with four others.

Since then, Heherson had been a headache for the Philippines government, and two years back, when he had kidnaped two Americans, he became a target for the CIA. The hostages had been kept on a remote island. Heherson moved them from place to place, and the CIA had never been able to locate the captured Americans to retrieve them. They were always one step behind.

The dossier contained a total of twelve photos of Heherson in different disguises. One showed him with sideburns that almost went down to his throat. Another photograph showed the man as clean shaven. In another, he wore a long red and white Santa hat. Doerr started visualizing the man. *He would be thin like bamboo; recent running around to evade capture by the CIA had perhaps made him thinner. He might have grown some sort of beard, to hide his appearance.*

At Los Angeles, Doerr switched to a Thai aircraft for the final ride to Bangkok. The aircraft took off into the salty Pacific air. The air hostess demonstrated the safety procedures, but Doerr looked outside; the enormous city of Los Angeles became smaller and smaller and was finally lost in the darkness.

Twelve hours later, Doerr was standing at the immigration entry, holding a red, Swedish passport. The name inside read Edvard Johansson. Mostly white men stood in the long line, waiting for their passport to be stamped. Some of the visitors were there for business, but the majority, Doerr knew, were looking for a good time.
A source had stated that Heherson lived in the jungles but liked to visit Bangkok for the occasional sexual rendezvous. His favorite place was a massage parlor on Soi 2, right off Ram Inthra Expressway, in Sukumvit.
Doerr reached the Presidente Hotel late at night. The next morning he visited the massage parlor at around noon. It was empty, and he was told to come back after three.
He returned at 2:45 and saw people going in and out. The place was preparing to be ready for prime time when Johns from all over the world would converge on them.
Doerr went inside, ordered a Singha beer and sat there for a half hour. Customers and a bunch of girls sat on opposite sides of a glass wall.
He tried to talk to the few men who were serving drinks, but they showed indifference. Sitting behind the glass wall, many girls tried to make eye contact with Doerr, but he avoided them and focused on his beer.
One woman was being excessively friendly, and she came over and sat next to him. Growing bolder, she started touching his shoulders, cheeks, and hands. He let her do that, and soon he paid three thousand baht to go into a private room with her.
She was a whitish, petite woman with black silky hair that hung down to a few inches below her shoulders. She wore a short pink skirt and a white blouse. She was about five feet and two inches and had a boyish look to her face. Doerr guessed she was about thirty years of age.
He followed the woman into the massage room. The room was about fifteen by ten feet wide; there was a queen size bed at the end, and an old TV stood on an even older wooden table near the door.
She pushed him to a sit on the bed, and then she put her hand on his belt, trying to unbuckle it.
“Please don’t,” he said.
“Why? You pay full price.” She kept pulling his belt. “I promise you enjoy it.”
“It’s okay.” Doerr pushed her hand and shifted away from her.
“Why?” The woman started removing her blouse. “You no like me?”

“It’s not that. See, I’m married.”
“Then why you come here?” The woman moved closer to Doerr, topless. “Many married people come here. It no problem.”
Doerr looked at the woman’s tiny breasts and the scar right above her navel.
“Do you know Heherson?” Doerr asked.
Instantly, the woman’s demeanor changed. She took a step back and picked up her blouse. “No. Why you ask?”
“I have important business with him. Do you know when he will come here next?”
“Oh. So that’s why you here? To catch him?” The woman’s face became red with fury, and she put her blouse back on. She took two steps back and pointed to the door.
Doerr realized too late that Heherson had paid everyone there to lie for him. He knew he had blown a good lead to the Filipino terrorist. He should have befriended the woman before broaching the question. Unfortunately, the idea of spending more time with the prostitute was repugnant to him.

IN THE EVENING, Doerr walked around the area surrounding the parlor and found a hotel, about five hundred feet away. It was small, with four stories; at the door he saw local boys hanging around, harassing anyone who passed by. He walked into the hotel and proceeded to the check-in office. A short young man, sporting a beard, sat there. Despite his torn shirt, he appeared to be managing the place.
“*Swadi Khap*,” Doerr greeted the man in Thai. He knew that even if you didn’t know the language completely, it’s better to start with a phrase in the local language. It always drew a chuckle.
The man smiled. “You want room?” he said, as if he was having a hard time believing it.
Doerr noticed a bad smell and took a look around, searching for the source. The paint on the walls needed the touch of a fresh brush, and the concrete floor had not been mopped in a while. “Yes, what is the rate per night? I’m a little short on cash.” Doerr thought it would be best to lie about why he was there.
“Okay, maybe you see room first. You will pay three-day rent advance.”
“Sure, no problem. Now show me, please. I want a room on the fourth floor, if you have one.”

“I no have four floor room,” the man said. “I have one third floor. You want see?”

You gotta be kidding me, Doerr thought and said, “Are you sure there is nothing on the top floor?”

“Yes. Is busy season, my friend.”

The man led Doerr upstairs. On the third floor, the man quickly walked to a room and opened the door. The man walked in, and Doerr followed suit, welcomed by a musty smell. The room was specious. Aside from the bed, an old dressing table lay against the wall, an old mirror hanging right above it.

Doerr walked to the door that led to the balcony and opened it. From the balcony, he could see the massage parlor clearly – who was going in and who was coming out. Everything discernible by a human eye at the parlor door could easily be recorded by a device from the balcony.

Doerr turned to the man and said, “I will take it.”

“You pay three-day rent in advance,” the man said. “Three thousand six hundred baht.”

“I will pay you two weeks’ rent in advance. But I have a condition.”

“What is your condition?”

“I don’t want anyone to come to my room and disturb me. No one should enter my room when I’m away. In short, no one should come to my room unless I ask for it. Got it?”

The man nodded five times, and then he extended his hand. “Now give money.”

IN DOERR’S PARLANCE, it was called a neighbor, and the people who had worked closely with him knew it. A neighbor was what he called the setup that watched a place or monitored someone’s activity; sometimes it was just a listening device, at other times it was a camera equipped with motion detectors or a laser beam on a high-tech machine that could confirm someone’s voice. An advanced version of a neighbor included a video-recording system with a detector that scanned for a particular face, body contour or gait.

Doerr moved to his new stinky hotel room and was pondering how to install a *neighbor* to keep an eye on the massage parlor’s door front. The source

had said Heherson was already in Bangkok, so there was a good chance that he could show up at any time.

Doerr stood on his balcony with a cup of coffee in his hand. He needed a twenty-four seven video-recording system, which would be triggered by someone going in and out of the parlor. But the five hundred feet distance between his new hotel balcony and the massage parlor door made usage of facial recognition technology to identify Heherson impossible.

Doerr made a call to the safe house in Bangkok. An innocent-sounding woman said ‘hello’ in a sleepy voice. Doerr said, “I need a few things.”

“What is the code word?” the woman asked.

“Navajo.”

The woman’s voice became alert immediately, “Send me an encrypted email with details of what you need, and everything will be ready within a couple days. I think you have the email address.”

“Yes, I do.” Doerr hung up.

Doerr finished his coffee and then turned his IBM laptop on. It took three minutes to boot up and showed several icons on the screen. Doerr inserted an Internet card into one of the laptop’s ports and clicked on an icon. A dialog window popped up, and Doerr entered his user ID and password.

Doerr drafted the email:

Two security cameras.

One high-precision long-distance motion detector.

One laptop equipped with image matcher software.

One Glock with a suppressor.

Three high-quality bugs.

Doerr thought for few minutes and then added – laser-equipped, long-distance voice recorder.

He was referring to a device that could pick up a voice from a distance of a thousand feet by beaming a laser at the window.

He thought for few more minutes and then clicked on the send button.

THE INSTRUMENTS ARRIVED two days later. A young man delivered the goods in three large, innocuous-looking suitcases. Once the man left, Doerr opened the suitcases, took all the gadgets out and started assembling them. It was painstaking work. By ten p.m. he had managed to set up the video cameras and the motion detectors.

After a test run, he checked the recorded images from the video camera. The quality was not good, as there wasn't much light at the massage parlor door, but he could do nothing about that.
He left the cameras on overnight. The next morning he fed the video from the cameras into his laptop and ran the software that would try to match the video against Heherson's image. After five minutes, the software reported that there was no match. It could have been because Heherson was nowhere near the parlor, or it could have been because of the poor quality of the video. The only way to find out was to sit and watch the video, scene by scene, for hours.
He stared at the video for two hours before needing a break. He disassembled the devices and placed them back into the suitcases, so even if the hotel housekeeping came in the room to clean up, they wouldn't see it. And if someone broke into the suitcases, Doerr would receive an alert on his cell immediately.
He left the hotel and walked aimlessly for a while. After an hour or so he returned to the shabby room and watched the rest of the video – there was no sign of Heherson.
That evening, Doerr again set up the recording devices, and the next day he went through the same routine, checking the footage; again, there was no Heherson.
On the fourth day, the software found a match, and Doerr jumped at the computer. The display showed Heherson arriving at the parlor at around ten p.m. and leaving with a happy face about an hour later. He wore black pants and a check shirt, accompanied by another man who looked like a bodyguard. Both men could be seen getting into a cab.
Doerr set up the cameras again that same evening but stayed glued to the monitor. He saw Heherson returning to the parlor at 10:05 p.m. If his job had been to snipe down the guy with an M16, it would have been a cinch. But the job, this time, was to get to him and listen to what he said into his phone. That should give enough information as to where his helpers were, and that would bring the CIA close to the hostages Heherson was holding. At the very least, Heherson's conversations should give a good lead.
Doerr watched the monitor for an hour, and, similar to the previous day's pattern, Heherson left at 11:15 p.m. At the front door of the hotel, a man was waiting with a motorbike. Doerr had given the man seven thousand

baht earlier in the day to arrange to have a motorbike wait for him the entire night.
Doerr took the bike and leaned against the wall, kicking a beer bottle that someone had left there.
Within minutes, Doerr saw Heherson come out of the parlor and climb into a waiting taxi. The cab pulled away from the building, and Doerr followed; the cab took a few turns, and then it merged onto the Ram Inthra Expressway.
The cab, a converted Toyota Corolla, was moving slowly through the traffic-ridden streets of Bangkok. It shot ahead a few times, but Doerr twisted the throttle and caught up with the cab easily. In Bangkok, motorcycles were able to drive much faster than a sedan, due to the congested traffic that never cleared, no matter how many new roads and bridges the government constructed.
After about five kilometers, the taxi took a turn, and so did Doerr. The new road had less traffic, and the cab picked up speed. As Doerr increased his pace, the air blew through his hair, and his shirt billowed behind him. He felt uncomfortable, but he continued to drive at a safe distance behind the taxi, which he hoped would soon stop at a cheap hotel, but it didn't. It crisscrossed through a number of streets. Doerr maintained a good distance; some roads were badly lit, and he expected that he had the stealth he needed.
A few turns later, the cab stopped in front of a large hotel. Doerr stopped in a dark shadow and watched a hotel employee come to the cab and help Heherson out. Doerr took out his smartphone, noted down the hotel name and immediately called Samuel.

THE NEXT DAY Doerr was drinking his coffee from a tiny foam cup in his hotel lobby. After four days in Bangkok, he was still grappling with jetlag. A local man sat at the next table. He wore no shirt and smoked and sipped coffee at the same time. Doerr watched a boy, barely fourteen or fifteen years old, carry in two huge suitcases. An elderly man, the apparent owner of the suitcases and obviously a new customer for the hotel, followed the boy.
Doerr wondered at what grade that boy had dropped out of school. He was so engrossed in his thought that he was startled by the ringing of his own

phone.
It was Samuel. “Good job, Max. Our techies were able to hack into the hotel computers and found a room number booked against one of Heherson’s known aliases.”
“Great,” Doerr said.
“Now you need to do one more thing.”
“What is that?” Doerr asked.
“Go to his room and get his cell phone, or its number. Then we can listen in on what the bastard says.”
“I have to go to his room, when Heherson is there, and snatch the phone from his hand?” Doerr said sarcastically. “Is that what your plan is?”
“Yeah, something like that,” Samuel paused for a few seconds. “Or go through his stuff and notes to find his number.”
“I have a better idea.”
“Okay, let me hear it.”
“You guys put a satellite watch on the hotel and tell me when he goes out. Do it during the daytime, so it’s still busy, or when I walk into the hotel the employees might become suspicious. Then I’ll get in his room and plant a bug. Your techies can match the voice coming out of that bug with the cell phone transmissions. When they find the match, they’ll also have the cell number, actual conversation and who he is calling. Then my job will be over.”
“I’m not sure if that will work, Max. So many things have to go right. Let me talk to my techie. I’ll get back to you.”
“If your techie says he can’t do it, then just get a new guy.”

THE FOLLOWING DAY, Doerr went to the safe house and picked up some key cards that had various security codes imprinted on them. Swiping two or three of those cards would guarantee access to any hotel room door without complaint.
A day later, Samuel called. “My techie figured everything out, just the way you said, Max.”
“Good to hear.”
“I have more good news. Heherson has just left the hotel.”
“You’re sure?”
“Yes,” Samuel replied. “I saw the real-time video feed myself.”

Doerr immediately hung up and rode his bike to Heherson's hotel and walked inside. The hotel lobby was teeming with people, and Doerr sauntered to the elevator without raising anyone's suspicion. No one gave him a second look, and no one followed him. Guests were reading newspapers in the lobby, and three hotel staff members were busy helping patrons with their luggage.

Inside the elevator, Doerr pressed the button for the sixth floor and was soon in front of room number 617 – Heherson's room. Doerr looked around and wiggled the handle: nothing. He started swiping the cards he had taken from the safe house, and upon swiping the fourth card, the door clicked open.

Inside, he planted three bugs – one under the bed, one under the sofa, and the last one under the cabinet in the restroom. Doerr knew some people had a habit of sitting on the toilet for a long time and making calls from there.

Samuel called the following day and told Doerr that Heherson's phone number had been identified by the techies, thanks to the bugs that he had placed. Langley folks heard Heherson give commands to his henchmen in the Philippines, and they received a plethora of information.

His assignment complete, Doerr packed up his bags and left Bangkok.

CHAPTER 7

During the flight back home to New York, he felt good. *Yes, this is what I needed.*

But as soon as he disembarked from the plane, the memory of Billy's dead body stabbed him in the chest like a sharp dagger. As he walked through the airport lounge, he saw his son's face on the glass walls. He stopped at a coffee shop, but the caffeine only made him feel emptier.

After a few days of downtime, he received another call from Samuel.

"Good job, Max. We have already identified where Heherson is holding the hostages. We got pictures of his compound, and a team of Marines are chalking up a path for the helicopters to get there. A Delta team is rehearsing how they will extract the hostages. Thanks again."

"You're welcome. I'm glad I was able to help."

"Your next job will start in two weeks. Get some rest."

Doerr hung up and decided to go and talk to the detective working on Billy's case. Doerr was told that the investigation had hit a wall and if someone did not come up with a solid lead, the case could be closed.

Doerr returned home and set about talking to his neighbors and local shop owners, asking them to distribute pamphlets he'd had printed asking for any information about the crime. But only a few of them were willing to help.

A week later, Samuel gave him his next assignment. Only when Doerr focused on work was his mind soothed a little. The job was in London; a terrorist, originally from Jordan, was hiding in a flat in Maida Vale. Doerr was told to flush him out and force him to go back to Amman.

HIS NAME WAS Sheraz Naseer. Naseer had come to London with a single purpose – to get rid of Abdullah, the king of Jordan. Naseer had entered the country on a UK student visa with an acceptance letter from a relatively unknown London University. The only Londoners who seemed to know about the University were its staff and the students.

Naseer did everything to achieve his goal, but after liaising with al-Qaeda's London cell and other Muslim terrorist outfits, he sadly realized that overthrowing the king would not be as easy as he had expected. He felt even more frustrated after learning that Jordan was not a big name on al-Qaeda's priority list.

But he was determined to be an important person in the fiefdom of terrorists. Naseer became a hot-shot authority in the terrorist circle by exploding a bomb in London's metro station and killing seven innocents, and then he swore against America. He wrote fiery blogs on the internet about his antipathy for the most powerful nation on Earth. He went to the mountains of Afghanistan for training and claimed to have killed four Americans there.

DOERR WENT TO London and took up residence in a hotel near Maida Vale for two months. He never told anyone what exactly he did, but the London police recovered a diamond-studded pendant and three thick gold necklaces from Naseer's apartment, which had been reported stolen by the wife of a billionaire Russian oil tycoon. A judge sentenced Naseer to three years in jail, but after two months he was deported to Jordan, where the state police beat him up and tortured him with spiked wires, squeezing out the last drop of his blood and every bit of information he possessed. The intelligence that he gave up was faxed to Langley within hours.

"OPERATION THREE IS going to be here, in America," Samuel explained, sitting across the table from Doerr in Susie's Bar. "In fact, it's right here, in New York."

"In New York?" Doerr asked as he pressed his beer bottle to his lips. Loud metal music played in the background. It was late evening, and the bar was full of drinkers who needed a break. Soon there would be no chair left unoccupied.

"Yes," Samuel said. "Al Mosabi, the Saudi minister and tycoon, will be visiting Central Park. He is a big financial supporter for terrorists. We are going to take him down. Rather, *you* are going to take him down."

"Can we kill him on US soil?" Doerr gave him a curt look. "Will that be right?"

"Everything is right if it's about killing terrorists."

"What if a Saudi furor breaks over this?"

"Well," Samuel had a smirk on his face, "we will let our do-nothing State Department handle that. Let them do some work. Why should we worry about everything?" Samuel took another sip of his beer and put the bottle

down. “Now, let’s talk about the details of the operation. This Mosabi guy has been funneling money to terrorists all over the world. He is here for an Arab League meeting. Many in the league know what he actually does, but most members don’t know. We need to get him. I’ve already emailed you his dossier. We will meet again and talk about the operation in detail after you go through it.”

Doerr nodded, but his mind vacillated. It was not like he had never killed anyone on American soil, but killing a foreign national, under the tutelage of the government right here in New York, was no small deal. But he was sure Samuel had done his homework.

JOHNNY’S STEAK HOUSE, a restaurant cum bar on Forty-Second Street, had been visited by Doerr many times.

He entered the place with Victor and Len, the two CIA men who had accompanied Samuel when Doerr had met him the first time. The maître d’ showed them to the leather-upholstered booth.

After ordering their beers, they started talking.

“I have some concerns about my next job,” Doerr said.

“Why?” Victor asked, and Len looked on.

“I have to take down a target here in New York.” Doerr looked down at the table and tapped the knuckles of his three fingers.

“Don’t worry,” said Len. “Samuel is the rising star in the CIA. Soon he’ll be a hotshot field manager. Trust me, he is covering every angle.”

Victor nodded, rubbing his bearded chin. “You will do well under him, Max, I’m telling you.”

“The operation is in Central Park.” Doerr let out a sigh. “Central Park, guys. I can’t imagine the commotion it will cause. So many kids play there. Imagine the psychological impact it will have on them.”

“We have to do the tough thing.” Victor leaned forward, and his brown beard hung over the middle of the table. “We are *meant* to be tough. We can’t be bothered by the thought of some kid getting scared. Maybe they should be scared; they should have a taste of reality. Now let’s make a toast.” The men raised their drinks.

SAMUEL AND DOERR were riding in a limo, shielded from outsiders' view by the tinted glass all around. It was October, and the city was getting ready for the upcoming winter. People walking the streets wore jackets, and no one had sandals on.

Samuel and Doerr sat side by side. The limo crawled along Seventh Avenue toward the park. Doerr's mind was racing. His thoughts veered from Billy to the M107 rifle in the duffel bag sitting in the rear seat, from the face of the target to the pandemonium that would certainly follow after the man was gunned down in the park.

The limo came to a sharp stop at a red light on Fifty-Fifth Street. Outside, two kids walked, holding their parents' hands.

The limo took a sharp right turn on Fifty-Ninth Street. Horses and carriages lined the street, ready to show tourists around the city. Doerr saw one stallion restlessly shift its weight from one leg to the other. One owner fed hay to his horse with one hand and patted its face with the other.

Two blocks later, the limo took a left turn; Doerr watched the buildings pass by. "Hey, stop here," he said to the driver. "We need to stop, back there."

Samuel tapped his shoulder. "Relax, Max. That old building the agency had is gone now."

"What do you mean?" Doerr pointed behind him. "The agency had two floors in that building. What happened to them?"

"We sold them a year back."

"Then where are we going to take down this guy from?" Doerr asked with a frown.

"Don't worry, I got the perfect place," Samuel said as the limo stopped in front of a building. It looked like a residential place. A sign outside read 'Call 212-315…to lease.'

Doerr could see the limo's reflection on the glass walls of the building. A blond old woman came through the revolving door. Etched on the glass was 'Sillman Realty.' He realized it was a condominium complex. "What are we going to do from here?"

"Come on; follow me." Samuel got out, the duffel bag in his hand.

Doerr could see the gate to Central Park on the left. He followed Samuel out of the limo. "We're going to do it from here?"

"Yes, come on."

Doerr followed Samuel through the revolving door. The fat security guard, in a blue uniform, gave him a stare. Doerr walked right behind Samuel into

the elevator. “Man, whose place is this?” Doerr was becoming more and more uncomfortable.
Samuel looked him in the eye. “A friend of mine. Okay?” Samuel pressed the button marked sixteen, and the elevator started moving up.
Doerr felt the pull. “What’s your friend’s name?” he asked. The elevator stopped with a jerk, and both men got out.
Samuel struggled to carry the duffel bag. He limped, and then he stopped at a door; a metal plate with 1604 etched on it hung on the door.
Doerr stood next to Samuel, put his hands on his waist and pointed to the door. “I am *not* going in there till I know who owns this place.”
“Okay, relax.” Samuel dropped his shoulders. “Her name is Irene, and we have been friends for a while. She is very rich but also patriotic. I asked for her permission to use this place for an hour.” Samuel kicked the ground and shrugged. “Now, can we get on with this?”
“Can you show me a picture of her?”
“Okay.” Samuel sighed. He put his hand inside his pants pocket and pulled out his smartphone. Samuel showed him a picture.
Irene was a young woman in a pink blouse, and the photo showed Samuel kissing her left cheek. “Oh, come on,” Doerr said. “You’re still at it behind your wife’s back.”
“At what?” Samuel unlocked the door and stepped one foot in. “Remember she’s just a friend. Now come on, time is running out.”
“Oh, yeah,” Doerr knew Samuel’s nature. *Once a womanizer, always a womanizer.*
Doerr knew Samuel’s first two marriages had ended badly, all because of his cheating nature, and he lied a lot. He had once boasted that he had a girlfriend in every European country he had visited. Between Amsterdam and Paris, he had a half dozen of them at one time.
Doerr raised his foot, about to enter the condominium. But his foot stopped in the air. “Wait, Samuel.” His uneasiness about the operation was growing. “Can you show me something written, some official confirmation for this operation?”
Samuel turned; he was inside the condo, and Doerr stood outside. “All right, I knew you might ask for that. Here it is. Take a look.” Samuel took out a paper from his pocket and held it out for Doerr.
Doerr took it and read. It was a letter, written and signed by the agency director, approving the operation, on the official CIA letterhead.

Doerr handed the letter back and followed Samuel inside, doubts still lingering in his mind. But he had already decided to go along with it; the letter was all the proof he needed.

Samuel placed the duffel bag on the shiny, dark granite countertop. “Now you go to work.”

Doerr opened the bag, took out the parts and assembled the M107 long-range rifle in exactly three and a half minutes. He took the magazine, already loaded with .50 caliber bullets, and clamped it to the rifle. Doerr knew an M107 was overkill for the job. A good-old M16 would have been enough.

Samuel placed the black bipod on the windowsill and handed the telescopic sight to Doerr. “Now, do what you do best. We’ve got only one shot. If we miss, he will hide, and we will never get the bastard under a crosshair again.”

Doerr clipped the sight to the rifle and took aim through the open window. The target stood in the park, near a large oak tree, surrounded by around twenty-five people. He wore a black blazer and a pair of black pants. His black beard and the thin mustache were the exact same as the photo Doerr had seen in the dossier.

“Shoot him,” Samuel hushed as he moved his lips closer to Doerr’s ear. “That’s the bastard.”

Doerr moved his rifle a few inches to the left and then to the right.

Samuel took out a photo and showed it to Doerr. “This is the man. Do you see him?”

Doerr nodded.

“*Shoot him,*” Samuel said. “We have to take him out with a single bullet and get the hell out of here. Quick!”

Doerr checked the picture on the paper. It was the same man. He settled the crosshair on the man’s head. He had a bald spot at the front, right above his forehead. It looked like he was giving a speech, and the folks around him were listening.

Doerr pulled the trigger.

The sun was bright, and the grass in the park had started dying. The man dropped to the ground. A few people around him swooped in, but most took a step back. A man nearby, who was making a balloon for his customer, stopped momentarily. The young boy, who extended his hand to receive his

favorite ice cream from a seller, froze. Doerr saw them in his telescopic sight.
“Let’s pack up and get out of here,” Samuel said.
Doerr disassembled the rifle quickly, and Samuel put the magazine and the barrel in the top left cabinet in the kitchen, and then he put the rest under the bed inside the first bedroom. He came back to the living room, rubbing his hands. “We have to get going now.”
As planned, Doerr and Samuel took two different elevators down. When Doerr exited the building, he saw neither Samuel nor the doorman. He kept his head down at the door to stay out of the line of sight of a security camera that ought to be present somewhere nearby. He sauntered along the sidewalk of Fifth Avenue and saw three ambulances racing by with horns blaring. He had no doubt about where they were heading.
Doerr took a cab to his apartment. He went straight to the fridge and took out a Michelob beer bottle. He sat on his sofa, turned the TV on and turned the channel to CNN. As expected, there was some breaking news. It was not the first time that he had done something that had appeared on TV within an hour. In the past, he had watched this sort of thing with mixed emotions.
He pressed the beer bottle to his lips, took a sip, and then he looked at the TV. He froze. The blonde anchor went on, “There was a murder in Central Park today. Chuck Jones, DEA Administrator, was killed by a single gunshot to the head. Police think it was a sniper job. From the initial analysis, they are sure that the bullet must have come from one of the high-rise buildings by the park on Fifth Avenue.”
Next, a photograph of a face appeared on the TV; it was all too familiar to Doerr. It was the face he had seen through his crosshairs just an hour ago.

CHAPTER 8

Alan Brushback, the successful lawyer, had graduated from Lousiana State University and received his law degree from Stanford Law School. He joined Brownton LLC, a reputed law firm in San Francisco, as an intern, and never looked back. He worked there for seven years before becoming a partner. After working as a partner for five years, he didn't know what to do with the millions he had accumulated.

The Republican incumbent congressman in the seventeenth district in California was under pressure for spending too much time in Washington; he was reviled by many voters, who considered him to be distant and out of touch. A few of Brushback's friends suggested that he ought to run for the office.

Brushback had never thought becoming a congressman would be so easy. Initially, he hesitated, but soon he was completely committed, after realizing that an opportunity like this was rare. He made a few phone calls, gave speeches at a few rallies, and went door to door for a few weeks before the Democratic primary. He defeated his rival by a margin of forty-seven to thirty-three percent.

At the start of the run-up to the General Election, he was trailing his opponent forty-seven to fifty-one. But he knew when to up the ante and when to sit calm. That was how he had won all his cases in court, by knowing when to attack and when to sit back and let the prosecution and its witnesses mess up their own cases.

When the election season started, Brushback struck with a barrage of negative ads that detailed how many days his opponent had spent in Washington during the last two years and how many in his own district. The ads showed photographs of the incumbent going on hunting trips with large rifles and dining with rich businessmen in expensive restaurants. The polls showed that the ratings were in dead heat, so Brushback tactically released a series of ads where he took the high road and detailed to the voters which specific bills he would support and which projects would receive finance if he won the election.

And boom! He became the congressman from the third district in California.

He won with a margin of two percent, and his opponent conceded by midnight on Election Day. The next day he took a victory tour through his

district, visiting the state offices and police stations, urging the folks to contact him about anything – no matter how small the issue was.
In the evening, he was exhausted when he reached home. He opened a twenty-year-old bottle of wine, filled two glasses and waited for his wife, who was freshening up in the bathroom.
“Don’t get too perky, though.” His wife, who was also a lawyer, came back and sat on the sofa and picked up her glass of red wine. “A congressman hardly has any power.”
“Really?” Brushback asked. “How do you know all that?”
“When four hundred and thirty-four other people hold the same position as you, you know you don’t have much power.” The wife cocked her head and took a sip from her wine glass. “I remember, I was in college and we needed more money for our library. So we went to the local congressman to see if he could help.”
“Go on.”
“Four of us went to the congressman’s office, and we explained to the man that we need some funds for the library. But instead of helping us, he told us how frustrated he was about how little power he had. Then he said that he would talk to this guy and that guy about our problem. Finally, nothing happened. We realized that we might as well have gone to the priest of the local church.”
“Thanks for destroying my excitement about being a congressman on the very first night,” he said, and they both laughed. Brushback emptied his wine into his mouth and poured more into his glass.
“What’s the plan for dinner?” Mrs. Brushback asked.
“I’m in no mood to go out. What do you want, pizza or Chinese?”
“You choose. After all, it’s your big night.”
Brushback took a sip. “Let’s have pizza. Good old pepperoni pizza from Papa John’s and garlic bread. Will you get me the number?”
After dinner, Brushback went to bed early with a sore feeling. He was not sure whether it came from drinking or the need to move up in the pyramid of power.

BRUSHBACK WAS EAGER to climb the ladder. In Congress, he tried to put his fingerprint on some appropriation bills, but it was hard. Congress was like middle school, and many of its senior members behaved like

bullies. There was a congressman from Texas, who regularly smoked cigars in no-smoking zones, just to exemplify personal rights. Some senior congressmen had formed a band at the top to keep newbies away from the real power.

Brushback's opportunity to ascend came during the middle of his third term. The incumbent Democrat Senator was being investigated for ethics violations, and the newspapers were constantly running stories about how the senator spent days and weeks in the Caribbean, hinting that he spent public money for personal travel and possibly prostitutes.

Brushback saw the crack opening up and reached out and wrote a series of op-eds in the *LA Times* and other major newspapers, detailing what he would do to balance the budget and reduce crime and gun violence. Soon, Brushback filed papers for the Democratic primary for the Senate seat, and it was a three-way race between him, the incumbent, and a rich businessman, who was burning his own millions for a ticket to the Senate. Initially, all three candidates hovered at around thirty percent in the polls. But that changed when the incumbent's wife filed for divorce, and the story appeared in the *Washington Post*. Brushback held fifty percent in the polls, the businessman candidate had about thirty, and the incumbent's numbers lingered in the teens.

Three months later, Brushback won the Democratic primary with a convincing margin and didn't bother to rerun as a congressman. He won the Senate election easily; since 1992, California had not sent a Republican to the US Senate.

After becoming a senator, Brushback was determined not to be sidelined by his senior senator colleagues. To his surprise, he found the Senate to have a congenial environment. Many senators were old and happy to be reelected. Brushback set his eyes on a position on the Senate Intelligence Committee, which he achieved after four years and made quite a name for himself in the process.

Many in NBC News and the *New York Times* called him a potential presidential candidate. What a difference four years made. He had been nobody in Congress, and now, four years later, people were pinning presidential hopes on him.

But he was no fool. He was aware that a lot of things would have to come together and go right before he could call the White House his home. He needed to have the right friends and the right enemies, too. He took a keen

interest in the work done by the CIA and liked to lock horns with its newly appointed director, Alison Stonewall, whenever he met her.

Appointed by President Campbell, Stonewall was the first ever woman chosen as a director of the CIA, and Brushback had voted against her during the Senate confirmation. Many of Stonewall's opponents, including Brushback, had argued that her lack of military combat experience would someday prove to be detrimental to the nation's security. But President Campbell had been determined, and the Senate had grudgingly confirmed her with a fifty-two to forty-seven vote.

Stonewall was a cum laude at Harvard and did a four-year stint in the army right after Harvard, during which time she provided translation service and helped military families relocate. She had taught at Georgetown University for six years before heading into a string of government jobs, including the post of New York attorney general for four years, at the end of which she went back to her old teaching job.

Brushback was open about his dislike for Stonewall and told everyone who would listen that she should be replaced as soon as possible.

SITTING ON HIS sofa, Doerr felt as if he were in a bad dream as he watched the CNN anchor push her hair from her forehead and continue.

"The DEA administrator, Chuck Jones, was speaking to a small group in Central Park. It happened so suddenly that two of the audience fainted, and they were later treated for shock. Detectives have arrived at the scene, but they are tight-lipped about any further details. We are being told that at seven p.m. tonight there will be a press conference."

Doerr started pacing in the living room and glanced at the TV frequently.

Oh God, I've killed the DEA administrator.

Shivers ran down his legs; he felt dizzy and sat on the sofa. He picked up the phone and dialed Samuel's number – no answer. He left a message asking him to call back immediately. An hour passed, and there was no call from Samuel. He called Victor and Len, but neither of them picked up the phone.

Doerr was up almost the entire night. He knew killing someone was a crime like no other unless it was for a good cause.

He slept fitfully at five in the morning and woke up at ten a.m. There was no message waiting on his phone; there was not even a missed call.

Doerr was worried sick. On the TV, they showed that the FBI detectives had identified the building where the bullet had come from. Doerr knew the rifle had been left in a top cabinet; he knew he had wiped clean his fingerprints from the trigger, but wasn't sure if his fingerprints were left elsewhere – on the rifle barrel, countertop, or window.

He thought of going back to the condo and retrieving the rifle himself. But maybe Samuel had already picked it up, and realistically, going back to the condo was out of the question.

Doerr called Samuel, Victor and Len many times over the next few days. Still none of them called back, and Doerr knew it was time for him to go to the office at Thirty-Third Street and confront them personally.

The next morning he put on his black suit, the best he had. He got on the Line Two subway train. On the way, he eavesdropped on a suited short man who was telling another guy that he had been jobless for six months and was going to a Wall Street firm for an interview.

Doerr got off the train and sauntered to the gate that led up to the ground level as the train hummed away, carrying the rest of the passengers to their destinations. He hoped that the short man would do well in the interview and get the job. He walked to Thirty-Third Street and turned right. When he reached the nondescript entrance of the CIA building, he paused. He pushed aside the old memories and focused on the current situation. Mentally he ran through the course of action he was about to take.

He stepped inside and saw the same warning as before – private property stay away. He walked past the sign, and, as expected, he was confronted by four hulking men in black uniforms.

"Please turn back, sir," the man on the right said.

"I want to talk to your boss," Doerr tried to explain. "I work for the CIA."

The black guard took his Glock from his shoulder holster. He looked at another guard and said to Doerr, "Show your ID."

"I don't have my ID with me right now. I just want to talk to your boss to clear up a few things." Doerr was sure if he told them what he had done lately, it would only lead to more trouble. And he had never received his ID after shaking hands with Samuel.

"This is a private place," the black guard raised his gun, "and has nothing to do with the CIA or whatever it is that you worked for. Now *please* leave, or we will be forced to take action."

Doerr knew they were just following protocol. But he could not be flippant about the raised gun, and engaging in any violence with these men was out of the question.

"I just want to speak to your boss for one minute. After that, I'll be gone. I promise."

The four men exchanged looks. The tall guard said, "Wait here," and disappeared inside. The remaining three guards stood blocking the entry and looked away from Doerr.

The tall man came back with a middle-aged guy who looked like he could be their boss. He was short but stout, a black man with a thick mustache. He threw an unfriendly look at Doerr and asked in a thick voice, "I am Steve. What can I do for you?"

Doerr told him that he worked for Samuel.

Steve frowned and said, "Come with me, please."

Doerr followed the man through corridors he remembered quite well. Steve turned at the end of the hallway and entered a room, and Doerr followed him. There were ten computers on a long table, and Steve sat in front of one of them. He asked, "What is his name again?"

"Samuel. Samuel Bolenback."

Steve typed something on the keyboard and clicked the mouse a few times. Then he turned in his revolving chair and said, "Samuel left us a year back."

"Are you sure?" Doerr could not hide his surprise. "How is that possible? Can you check one more time?"

Steve frowned, turned to the keyboard, typed something and clicked the mouse again, and then turned the monitor so Doerr could see it. "See here. Samuel Bolenback – end of service, fifteenth November, 2010."

Doerr moved forward to see the monitor. He saw the same date, and the icy hand of realization gripped the back of his neck, and his blood ran cold. A feeling of anger and sadness spread through his body at an intensity that he had never felt before in his life.

"Now get the hell out of here," Steve ordered.

FBI SPECIAL AGENT Josh Miller sat on a chair in the forty-sixth floor of the FBI office in Manhattan. He had joined the FBI when he was twenty-three, the youngest age allowed by the FBI for a new recruit. Five years back, when he was twenty-seven, he had tracked down the seventh man on

the ten-most-wanted list, in Mexico City. Soon after, he was promoted to the elite team.
Sitting on his chair, he looked at the file on the DEA administrator's murder. A single .50 caliber Remington Magnum bullet had hit the man's head, killing him instantly. Judging by the angle at which the slug had entered the skull, it must have come from a height of thirty to fifty floors up. The closest building of that height was at a distance of about fifteen hundred feet from the murdered man. Miller knew the sniper was a darn good one. The question that remained was whether the killer was as good at covering his tracks. But he was sure in his mind that the killer's days of freedom were numbered. The FBI profiler and the behavioral specialist would arrive at the scene tomorrow.
Miller looked outside but could only see a tall glass building, belonging to a bank, blocking his view. As he gazed at the glass walls, he could see his boss, O'Brien, approaching. O'Brien reported directly to the FBI director. O'Brien stopped in front of Miller's cubicle.
Miller turned his black revolving chair to face his boss. "So far, we don't have a solid lead."
"We are becoming the butt of a joke," O'Brien said, not even trying to hide his frustration. "The Internet is abuzz with messages like 'cops do more when a homeless guy dies in another city.'"
"We're doing everything we can. So far, we've gathered only minor details. No suspect yet."
O'Brien took a step forward and looked straight into Miller's eyes. "Let me hear the minor details."
"We interviewed some people – shopkeepers, guards in the nearby residential buildings. One man reported he saw a tall man rush out of the building immediately after the shooting. He carried a large carry-on suitcase. A guard in another building said he saw two men enter the building. One carried a duffel bag. The guard never saw the two men leave. He didn't get a good look at them either."
O'Brien shook his head and tapped his knuckles on the table; light reflected off his shiny bald head. "We gotta do something. The press is baying for blood. They're saying terrorists are here, killing anyone they want."
"Terrorist or not," Miller said, "the shooter was a darn good one. He put a bullet right in the middle of the DEA administrator's head and didn't need

to take a second shot. He must have had real good training – Marines, Navy or Army. I don't think this is a terrorist job."

IT WAS OCTOBER, and the colors of fall were arriving in Virginia. Doerr drove his rented crimson-color Chevy Impala on Route 270 toward Langley, and the traffic was getting thicker. The memory of the mammoth white CIA buildings was fresh in his mind. After he had been rebuffed by the office at Thirty-Third Street, he was desperate to talk to someone he knew.

He had phoned Lazarus, who had been his boss when he had quit the agency three years ago. The call had gone to voicemail, and he left three messages, but there was no callback. Doerr was headed for the CIA Headquarters, not to see Lazarus, but his old buddy Andrew, who worked in the Science and Technology division. Andrew had held a desk job at Langley for almost fifteen years, and Doerr knew his area of expertise was cell phones and other wireless devices.

When Doerr reached the parking lot, it was already ten a.m. He hurried through the lot to the concrete walkway. An elderly man held the glass door open for him. Thanking him, Doerr went straight to the reception desk.

"I'm Dawn," the receptionist greeted him. "How can I help you?"

"I'm here to meet Andrew," Doerr said. "Andrew Johnson."

The heavyset lady looked at him over her rimless glasses and asked, "Your name?"

"Max Doerr."

"ID, please."

Doerr opened his wallet and handed over his New York driver's license. He watched the lady put the license inside a slot, and the black machine made a cracking noise. After a few more seconds, the license came out. The lady gave him a visitor tag, and Doerr affixed it to his shirt.

The receptionist pointed to the waiting area in the corner and lifted the black handset of the phone, indicating he should go and wait while she called Andrew. Doerr proceeded to the designated area, which was empty but for a black leather cushiony sofa.

Not much has changed here in three years, he thought.

Doerr decided not to sit; he stood in the middle of the room and waited.

Five minutes later, Andrew was standing in front of him. “It’s been a long time,” he said, grinning. “How you doing, buddy?”
“Great.” Doerr took a step closer to Andrew and said, “How is it going?”
“Good. Now come on,” Andrew said and then walked to the elevator, scanned his ID card and pressed the elevator button. Doerr followed him. Once they were inside the elevator, Doerr asked, “What kind of work are you doing these days?”
“We’re working on some pretty interesting stuff in the mobile area. Now we can pinpoint a cellphone’s location within two seconds.” Andrew obviously took a lot of pride in what he did. “The goal is to be able to tell where someone is – in real time – as the person walks through…let’s say a mall or a large office, like this one, from where a communication signal isn’t all that great.”
Doerr was thinking through his next plan of action. He desperately wanted to talk to Lazarus. But he was sure if he told that to Andrew, he would not agree and might even escort him out.
Doerr followed Andrew to his cubicle. The table was strewn with at least fifty mobile phones. Old Nokia phones, Samsungs, an iPhone – all kinds of phones. Andrew showed him a printout of the white paper he had written. “It will be published in *Discover* magazine next month,” Andrew said proudly.
“I thought all the work you guys do is confidential.”
“It is. But sometimes we collaborate with outsiders, such as researchers in universities, who are desperate to publish their work. So we allow them to publish, but they have to withhold any stuff that directly concerns us.” Andrew held up the printout. “This will be published under the name of Professor McClusky of Yale. He does a lot of work for us. I never get any recognition for the work I do,” Andrew sighed, “at least not outside the agency.”
“We never get any outside recognition for anything,” Doerr said.
They carried on their conversation a while longer. “Let’s go for lunch,” Andrew said. “It’s 12:30.”
They headed for the cafeteria. Doerr picked up a grilled chicken salad and a bottle of Diet Snapple. He finished his lunch quickly while Andrew munched his sandwich.
Doerr suddenly stood up. “All right. It was so nice to see you. I must be going.”

Doerr pushed his chair back, took one last look at Andrew's bewildered face, and without giving him a chance to reply, he walked away briskly. He felt bad using Andrew to gain entry into the CIA office. But he had to do it, and Andrew wouldn't be in any sort of trouble for letting him in.

Doerr walked through the wide door out of the cafeteria and into the marbled walkway that connected to the main building. He took the next turn and then another, so Andrew wouldn't be able to see him, if he was following.

He walked to the area where Lazarus's office was located. On the way, he watched the antennas outside that were capturing signals from satellites orbiting two hundred miles above.

Doerr took the elevator to the third floor and then walked straight to Lazarus's office.

The door was wide open. Two monitors lay on the glass-covered table, and Lazarus was talking on the phone, holding a pen in his right hand. His face was pointed away from the door, so he didn't see Doerr at first. There was a book rack in the room, holding at least a hundred books and some thick folders. Doerr knew some of those folders held secret information about the world's most notorious men. On top of the rack were four world map globes. On the other side there were six big clocks hanging on the wall that indicated local times in different parts of the world.

"How are you?" Lazarus greeted Doerr. A thin, cautious smile showed on his face. "I will have to call you back," he said into the phone and hung up.

"I'm good." Doerr took two steps inside and said, "How are *you*?"

"Good. What brings you here?"

"Listen, Lazarus, I'm in trouble," Doerr got to the point quickly. He rested his hands on top of the high wood chair.

"Oh yeah, I got your voicemails." Lazarus looked at him, and then his eyes veered away. "But I've been busy. I was about to call you."

Doerr knew his old boss was lying, but he played along. "It's okay."

"The thing is, Max, Samuel doesn't work for us anymore. He left us a year back, I think," Lazarus said. "I don't know why he left, though. So whatever you did for him must be for the new organization where he works." The smile returned to Lazarus's face.

Doerr was now sure Samuel didn't really work for the CIA. *But then who did he work for?*

When Doerr had left voicemail for Lazarus, he had told him only that he did some operations in Bangkok and London for Samuel. He hadn't mentioned about the DEA administrator; he couldn't. "I'm worried, Lazarus. What I did for him in London and Bangkok was illegal if he wasn't authorized by the CIA."

Lazarus sat up straight. His large belly touched the table. "Where exactly did you work for him?" he asked with a gloomy face.

"One was in London, and one in Bangkok," Doerr said.

"I know that. Where exactly in Bangkok and London?"

"In Bangkok, it was in Sukumvit area. In London, it was in Maida Vale," Doerr said and realized that when he worked for Samuel, he had always worked through Samuel and never really worked directly with anyone else at the CIA. When he needed the CIA techies to do something for him, he had passed the request through Samuel and got the result through Samuel as well. The report on what happened to the Jordanian terrorist came through Samuel's mouth only.

"I can't really help you on this, Max. Maybe you should contact the police."

"Police? You must be joking."

"I am not joking, Max. You left the agency on your own volition a long time ago, and now I have no relationship with you. I won't be able to provide any kind of help," Lazarus said and turned his face away.

Doerr knew the conversation was nearing its end. "Come on, Lazarus, help me. I worked for *you* – and the agency – for thirteen years. I risked my life to bring down those bad guys. You gotta help me track down Samuel and see what he was up to."

"First of all, you did not work for me for thirteen years. Maybe you did for the agency, but not me. And secondly, it would be illegal for me to help you in any way."

"Illegal? Come on!"

"Listen, Max, there's nothing I can do for you," Lazarus said with a touch of anger and shook his head. "How did you get in here, anyway?"

Doerr stood up and walked out without answering. He had worked for Lazarus for so many years, and this was what he got in return. He was livid that he had come to Lazarus, who was his last chance, and had been rebuffed like a street dog. Now he could do only one thing – take matters into his own hands.

He thought of calling Gayle but decided not to. He didn’t want to pass his pain to the person he loved most. He went back to his car and turned the music system to some dance music and drove to the highway. But it didn’t calm him, so he headed for the nearest gas station to pick up a pack of Marlboro.

CHAPTER 9

Doerr drove at more than eighty miles an hour on Highway I-95 South. He knew that Samuel had lived in an old apartment in Richmond, and that was where Doerr was headed. Samuel might have moved out, but it was worth a shot.

When he reached the Green Knoll apartment complex in Richmond, it was 3 p.m. The complex must have had at least a hundred units. The connecting roads were empty. Doerr passed the kids' playground that had a seesaw and a slide, but no kids were playing there. He drove on and passed two deep brown painted buildings, and then he stopped at the third one. Unit 2C, where Samuel used to live, was on the second floor. Doerr got out of the car, glanced at the purple daisies on the ground, and headed for the stairs. He went upstairs and wiggled the doorknob of apartment 2C. It was locked. Samuel might be out. He looked for a spare key under the doormat but found nothing. He went back downstairs and walked through the dingy hallway to the other side of the building. Now the building was on his right, and the perfectly mowed green pasture lay to his left. The apartment had a balcony; nobody was around, and Doerr started thinking about getting upstairs to check out Samuel's apartment, to see if he could get a clue about where to find him. He looked at the drainpipe, but it looked much too light to bear his weight.

He walked around to find something he could use to climb. At the end of the building he saw a long wooden log with a metal prong attached. *Perfect*, he thought. He brought it back underneath the unit, attaching the prong to the railing of the balcony above. He started climbing. The thick wooden log cracked but held his weight. As he climbed, he felt the old pain in his hip; he ignored it, and soon, he was standing in front of the glass back door of apartment 2C.

He tried to peek inside, but everything looked dark. He took his shirt off and wrapped it around his sweaty right elbow; turning around and placing his back to the door, he raised his arm and smashed through the glass with his elbow. The door cracked, but the glass did not shatter. One more whack was all he needed to smash the door enough for him to carefully insert his hand and unlock the latch.

He stepped inside but could see no one. He turned the lights on and heard some noise coming from the bedroom. He instantly became more alert and

picked up the long glass vase that sat on the corner table, ready to hit, in case someone came out and attacked him. He tiptoed to the bedroom door and held his breath. A black and white cat sat on the bed, looking at him, giving the impression it was about to pounce. Ignoring it, he walked inside. He saw a large, framed photo of a young couple, and the man looked nothing like Samuel.

Doerr quickly moved back to the living room and saw a stack of mail in the center of the coffee table. The name on the first envelope was Jennifer Statenburg; another envelope showed Michael Statenburg. Some had both names. He realized Samuel must have moved out.

Soon, Doerr was back on the highway, this time driving north, heading home to New York. The drive was long and boring. Traffic was heavy, so he took a break at six p.m. at a highway rest area. When he set off again, the traffic had eased but only a little bit.

He reached his apartment late in the evening. After a quick cold shower to wash away the stress of the day, he ate a light dinner of a tuna sandwich with two pickles. He flopped down on the bed afterwards, but wasn't able to sleep. The memory of his painful loss accompanied him no matter how hard he tried to remove it from his brain. Images of how Billy might have fought for his life in that very apartment played in his mind.

He stood up, went to the medicine cabinet and popped two sleeping pills. It wasn't enough to put him to sleep. An hour later, he left the building, deciding to go for a walk. It was after one a.m., and the street was empty – no cars, no pedestrians. He strolled ten blocks and saw a NYPD police car slow down as it passed him, but then it moved on.

He took a right turn at the next junction. He was going to take another turn a few blocks later and circle back to his apartment. There was no noise except for the occasional siren of a police car or an ambulance vehicle in the distance. He walked past the next junction quickly, passing a few houses and a narrow alleyway. While passing, he turned his head toward the alley. He thought he saw a man crouch down, but he wasn't sure, and he continued to walk. He heard a woman's voice, a grunt, more like a scream. He stopped walking and watched the next signal turn green from red, and then he heard it again – a call for help. He thought for a second. *Should I just keep walking?*

He turned. When he reached the mouth of the alley, he heard it again. It was a woman desperately seeking help, being held down by a man.

Doerr ran over and saw immediately what was going on. The man had his jeans pulled down to his knees, and the woman was on the ground beneath him. Her leather jacket lay nearby, and her shirt was torn. Doerr had no doubt what the man was about to do to the woman: throughout the ages bad men had done this, and the weaker sex suffered.
“Please help,” the woman cried.
Doerr pulled the man up by his shirt collar and made him stand straight before punching him in the face. The man was about five feet eight and perhaps weighed in at around a hundred and sixty pounds.
Blood spurted from the man’s nose, and the woman scrambled to her feet, grabbing her jacket and clutching it about herself.
The man wiped his face with his left palm and took a look at it. He turned his head left and then right, obviously riled by the sight of his own blood. He gave Doerr a piercing look, and then the man put his hand in his jacket pocket and withdrew a gun. To Doerr, it looked like a 9mm pistol. The woman put her hands to her face, fearful of what would happen next.
“Now you see,” the man said angrily and pointed the gun at Doerr’s head and took a few steps toward him.
Doerr straightened up and was tense at first. Then he noticed how the man was holding the firearm, cocked to the side, barrel slanted toward the ground. Instantly, he realized that the man was no pro. Doerr’s nerves calmed. He knew that a gun should be pointed at the enemy’s head, not at anything else.
“Now what?” The man took one step back and shook his gun. “Are you going to leave or not?”
Doerr raised his hands, “Okay. I’ll leave, but she’s leaving too.” He pointed to the woman.
“No way!” The man was stepping forward again. “She’s my bitch. Who the hell are you?”
Doerr lowered his eyes, and the man continued to move forward. Doerr wanted to give the impression that he wasn’t watching the gun anymore, but he kept an eye on the man’s finger over the trigger, obliquely.
When the man was close enough, Doerr made his move. He swung his right hand, which landed on the man’s wrist like a heavy ax. The gun fell from his grasp, and Doerr grabbed the man by his long hair and threw him to the ground, everything happening in a fraction of a second.

Doerr immediately crouched down over the man's body, pinning him to the floor with his right elbow on the man's throat.
The woman, who looked Latino to Doerr, was crying in relief. "Thank you so much."
"What were you doing here at this hour?" Doerr asked.
"I was going home from work – at the hospital a couple of blocks over – and that guy dragged me here." She pointed to the would-be rapist. "I can't thank you enough."
"It's okay. Now go," Doerr said and loosened the pressure of his elbow on the man's throat, letting him breathe.
Doerr watched the woman hurry away, taking a left turn out of the alley and disappearing from view. Doerr kept the man pinned down for a few more minutes and then said, "Stay down, and I won't kill you."
Doerr stood up and retrieved the gun. It was a 9mm Colt. He took the six-bullet magazine out and checked it before returning it to the gun.
He leveled the gun at the man, who froze. "Get the hell out of here."
The man looked at Doerr, and then he backed away, slowly at first, and then breaking into a run.
Doerr tucked the gun in his pocket and then walked back to his apartment.
He woke up at eleven a.m. the next morning, when most New Yorkers were at work or school. He grabbed his iPhone and called Gayle. It went straight to voicemail, and he left a message, asking her to call back immediately. Living all by himself was becoming too much to bear, and he wanted her back. While he waited, he decided to visit the library.
He received Gayle's call in the afternoon, and she agreed to come home after work. On his way back from the library, Doerr realized that the fridge in the apartment was nearly empty, so he picked up four bags of groceries before returning to his apartment and waiting for Gayle.
When Gayle got home, they caught up for a while, chatting over a drink on the sofa, and then they headed for the bedroom, where they made passionate love.
Earlier, over the phone, Doerr had told her about rejoining the agency and the two jobs he had done overseas for Samuel. He could not tell her that he had killed a very important man and the FBI would be looking for him, the way a thirsty man looks for water in a desert.
Gayle took a bath and then cooked pasta with salmon and some mashed potatoes. After a long time, Doerr enjoyed a home-cooked dinner with her,

so much so that he almost forgot his troubles. The tension in his mind was gone, and he laughed.
But the stress came flooding back when they turned on the TV. On CNN, Doerr saw a woman's face that looked familiar. But he could not put a name to her.
He turned up the volume. The newswoman kept talking, "Irene Clark, thirty-two, was found dead when police broke into her apartment. Her mother had raised the alarm after Irene failed to return her calls. The slain woman was living alone, in the Fifth Avenue area, after separating from her rich husband. A divorce case was going on in the New York City Civil Court."
Gayle said something, but Doerr shushed her. "Wait."
"There are speculations that the husband is somehow behind this." The newswoman continued. "But police say they have uncovered no evidence so far to back that theory. They found three guns and a long-range rifle in her apartment."
Doerr froze as he saw a shot of the building on the TV. It was the same building where Samuel had dragged him to take that shot. Now he remembered why the woman looked so familiar. He had seen Irene's picture on Samuel's phone and in a large, framed photograph in the condo. In the picture, she had worn a whitish dress and a diamond broche that had held the dress together, a Mona Lisa-like smile on her face.
Doerr stood up and started pacing. He had no doubt about who killed the woman.
Samuel, Samuel, Samuel – eliminating witnesses. That's what he is doing.
"What's wrong, Max?" Gayle asked.
"You see what's going on," Doerr stood in front of her and pointed to the TV. "Helpless people are being murdered in the city every day."
"But we live in New York." She stood up and faced him. "It happens here all the time."
"But this? This…" Doerr stopped in the middle of the sentence. He wished he could tell everything to his wife. That he was the one who had taken a shot with the M107 rifle from the condo they were just showing on the TV. He wished he could tell her everything, someday.

FBI SPECIAL AGENT Josh Miller was sweating in his chair, and he tried to loosen his black tie. His boss sat across the table. Speculations about who killed the DEA administrator and Irene Clark were splattered all over the *New York Times*, other newspapers and the Internet, and Miller had no clue about who had killed them.

Miller had been investigating the murder of the DEA man for over a month and had interviewed more than a hundred people. He had access to the best forensic experts in the country and was backed up by a team of twenty FBI special agents.

"Do you have a name?" O'Brien asked and gave him a look that was typical of a school teacher encountering a student giving a lame excuse for unfinished homework.

"Not yet." Miller sighed and continued in an unsteady tone. "We found the murder weapon for Clark's death. The bullet in her head matched the gun found in her apartment. Gunpowder residue was found on her fingers. There was a M107 rifle in her apartment, which matched the bullet fragments found in the DEA administrator's body. There were several other guns found in her apartment, all of which had only her fingerprints on them. It looks like she was a gun enthusiast. We talked to her estranged husband, who says she was never into guns."

"Maybe she picked up the hobby recently," O'Brien adjusted his tie, "to avoid boredom, or for protection, or maybe both, who knows." He swung his hand.

"Possible, but it's hard to see her committing suicide. She was doing well by herself. Half of her husband's ten million dollars was about to fall into her lap. Her husband is the only one who benefits from her death."

"I see your point." O'Brien moved his head back and forth, thinking hard. "It could be her, or her husband, or maybe a third suspect who we know nothing about right now."

Miller nodded.

"And we may never know. I say let's go to Wall Street," O'Brien said with a tone of finality, "and talk to the husband."

"I'm quite positive," Miller stood up, "that the husband is involved in all this, in one way or the other."

CHAPTER 10

SAMUEL WAS DRIVING down Highway 85 in Atlanta during rush hour, heading for Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport. He had a Paris flight to catch.

He had planned to take the trip with Irene. But now, he was going to the City of Love with her blood on his hands.

Irene had been a good girl. To Samuel, good meant useful, and he knew how to use people – men or women. But Irene was different. Samuel had almost fallen in love with her. He had already made plans about how to get rid of Irene's rich, Wall Street husband. A hit by a cabbie with a fictitious license plate, or a late night mugging gone wrong – Samuel just had to plot out a few more details. He knew he was good at hatching plans.

But then that stratagem had not even been necessary.

The murder of the DEA administrator in the park had made Irene ask more questions than he was prepared to answer.

Were you in my condo the day the DEA administrator was killed? Did you hear the gunshot? I think someone was in my condo. Do you have any idea who it could be?

Samuel did not like being asked questions and much less by a woman.

Does she suspect I have anything to do with the murder? Samuel had wondered.

Even if she did, it didn't really matter – her life would end; Samuel had decided.

Killing Irene was a cakewalk. A pull on a silenced Glock's trigger was all that was needed.

The post-murder cleanup was harder. Wiping the floor, placing the gun to make it look like a suicide, acid-burning the serial numbers from the firearms – it was a lot of work.

Leaving the long-range rifle, the one that Doerr had used to kill the DEA Administrator, in her condo had been a marvelous idea. The FBI would be scratching their heads like six-year-old boys facing a hard riddle.

Samuel chuckled as his SUV crawled toward the airport parking lot. He cursed the Atlanta traffic, its citizens, and the entire city.

When Samuel entered the international terminal at the airport, it was barely twenty-five minutes from his flight time. If he missed his plane, it would have been a first in his life, but he made the flight.

SAMUEL REACHED CHARLES-de-Gaulle Airport early in the morning. To save money, he usually stayed at a three-star hotel whenever he visited Paris. But this time he felt good about himself and checked into the Carlton Ritz.

His cab crawled through the heavy morning traffic, and he reached the hotel at eight. After a shower, a couple of hours' sleep and heavy lunch of steak, he felt lethargic. He went down to the hotel bar and gulped down two large glasses of wine, hoping to find a woman to keep him occupied. But he was out of luck. He thought of Irene, who he had met a year back, in a New York single's bar.

It had barely been two weeks since he had killed her.

He smoked a cigar and returned to his room. He dialed a number for an escort service that he had been given furtively by the concierge. Within an hour, there was a knock on his door. Samuel opened it and was disappointed by the plump woman who stood in front of him. One of his skills was that he could tell a woman's age, even if she wore an inch of lipstick and a hundred layers of makeup on her face.

The woman looked to be around forty-seven, to Samuel. But he didn't have enough energy to send her back and call for another one.

"Come on in," he said in French, a language he knew quite well, and held the door open.

As she passed him, she flirtatiously touched his cheek. He gave her a slap on her ass over her black leather skirt. Samuel went inside the toilet. After relieving himself, he sprayed some eau de toilette on his shirt and behind his ears. When he came out, the prostitute was filing her nails. She stood up and headed for the bathroom.

Ten minutes and some meaningless talk later, the woman took off her clothes and lay on the bed, waiting for Samuel. When Samuel got on top of her, his manhood was limp, and he blamed it on her age.

Forty-seven.

"I asked for a thirty-year-old," Samuel grumbled.

"I'm thirty-three," the woman snapped, which Samuel knew was a lie.

"I hate liars." He pressed his nose on hers and grabbed her shoulders.

"It's your fault," the woman said angrily and clenched her teeth. "You're not man enough."

“What did you say?” In a moment, Samuel was taken over by rage and felt the rush of blood into his brain. His hands closed around her neck, and his face became red with fury.

“I said you’re a prick,” the woman said and pouted. “Now let me go.”

“You are not going anywhere, bitch!” he said as he tightened his fingers around her throat. “I want my money’s worth.”

The woman looked scared and started fighting to get away from under him. But Samuel’s strong hands were constricting her windpipe. Her hooks and jabs were as useless as the kicks she delivered to Samuel’s strong hip.

He pressed his nose harder on hers as his hands held tight around her neck. The woman grabbed his hair with both of her hands, but it did not affect him. He continued to choke her.

Minutes later, her body went limp; her legs lay spread and palms pointed to the ceiling.

Samuel finally let go and got off the woman. As he wiped the sweat from his brow, he realized what a mess he had just created. He panicked; in just two weeks he had killed two women. Thought of jail flashed through his brain. He had seen a prison, and what he hated the most about it was that an inmate had to do his toilet business in public. Anyone could pass by and see him like that. Moments later he smiled to himself. *I ain’t going to no jail*.

In his mind, he quickly went through the things he needed to do for cleanup. First he wrapped the woman’s body in the bed sheet. Then he made a few phone calls.

CHAPTER 11

CIA DIRECTOR STONEWALL stared at the computer monitor. For the third time, she was going over the agenda of her three p.m. meeting.

Stonewall had dithered when President Campbell's aide called her two years ago, asking her to become the first female director of the CIA. Her professor husband was all for it, but her mother and sister, her confidants, were against it. She had a twelve-year-old son and a nine-year-old daughter. The kids had no opinion on whether Mom should accept the new job, but the older one insisted that Mom should be home by seven p.m. and should spend the weekends with him.

Stonewall had mixed feelings about her two-year service as the National Security Officer under the previous president. She had liked the responsibility but hated the constant bickering among politicians and their urge for power and micromanagement.

Ultimately, her husband had won, and she headed for the confirmation hearing at the Senate. During the three-day-long hearing, she was pounded by all sorts of insults and innuendos, especially from Senator Brushback. It was almost as if he had a personal agenda against her. She knew that the only appointee he had so vehemently opposed was Chuck Jones, the now deceased DEA administrator.

After being confirmed for the director position, the friction with Brushback only increased, and the senator went after her every chance he got. As director, Stonewall decided to keep the deputy director, Lazarus West, who was picked for the position by the previous head of the CIA. Lazarus was a trusted, experienced hand, who had worked with the agency for more than twenty years. He was revered by many in the agency and feared by most. But Lazarus was due to retire within a year, so finding a replacement was a top priority for Stonewall.

She had called for a short meeting with Lazarus right before the three p.m. call. She swung round in her chair as Lazarus walked in her office and took a seat.

"Can you take care of the three p.m. call?" Stonewall was quick to the point. "I have a more important meeting to attend." She lied. She just wanted to avoid another face-off with Brushback.

"No problem," Lazarus said, grinning. "Who else will be there?"

“Senator Brushback, two other senators, one of our field officers in Tehran and an Israeli agent from Mossad named Nadav. The meeting is about an operation Nadav was about to embark on, in Iran. We have asked him to hold off till our own man gives the go-ahead.”
“What if Mossad doesn’t listen to us? What should we do?” Lazarus asked.
“That’s why I’m asking you to be at the meeting, to smooth out things with them and hold off that asshole Brushback. He thinks Mossad should do what we tell them to do.”
Lazarus shifted in his chair and adjusted his glasses. “Okay, I’ll do it, but there is something I need to talk to you about.”
“What?” Stonewall looked at Lazarus inquisitively and touched her chin. *Quid pro quo,* she thought.
“There’s this guy: Max Doerr. He left us three years back, and now he wants to come back.”
“I heard about him. He’s hot tempered – shouted at a senator and was forced to resign, correct?”
“That is correct, but he was one of the best of the best. His sniping capabilities are unparalleled. Many of us used to call him ‘the assassin.’”
“But, if we take him back, won’t that send the wrong message to other operatives?”
“Maybe.” Lazarus touched the back of his neck nervously.
Stonewall could see that Lazarus wanted Doerr back desperately. She leaned forward and asked, “Any other reason why you think we should take him back?”
Lazarus hesitated and then said, “Yes, there are other reasons. He saved my life once.”
“How?”
“When Doerr was working in Saudi Arabia, we were due to have a meeting in Riyadh’s Al-Faisaliah Hotel. I was to meet three Saudi intel agents. A senator was going to join us as well. Minutes before the meeting, Doerr called me and said there was a ninety percent chance that a terrorist attack was going to take place in that hotel. I ignored him, and we were all set to start the meeting, but Doerr called and warned me again. I didn’t show up and asked the senator not to go as well. Later, we learned that three gunmen erupted into the conference room at around the time when we were supposed to have that meeting. The gunmen opened fire. Nine people died, including two of the three Saudi intel agents. The third one was shot twice

in the chest. We discovered that terrorists had placed some gas cylinders in the room next to the conference room, but luckily they didn't explode. So, yes, I probably owe my life to him."

"Okay." Stonewall clutched a pen. "Let me think about it. I'll let you know. But for now, don't tell him anything." She turned her attention to the computer monitor on her desk, indicating the meeting was over.

CHAPTER 12

Ross Calpone had good people skills. He knew it; plenty of people told him so. He was neither brave nor physically strong. If he hadn't cheated in his college exams, Ross would never have gotten a degree. He was bad with books but good with people.

After he graduated from Florida State University, he spent six months by the sea in Italy, under the sun. Money was not an issue; his father had plenty of it from his large orange business in the sunshine state. Ross spent months in the Catanzaro area of Italy, had a local girlfriend for a few months and could speak the local language passably, in a broken manner.

After he returned from Italy, his father had wanted him to pursue a career in law enforcement. The father thought it would make him look good if his son joined the FBI.

At five feet six inches, 180 pounds, and with a low GPA, he was not the kind of person the FBI was looking to recruit.

Ross applied for a job at the FBI and was rejected after the first interview. After that, he filled in an application form on the CIA website. He was surprised to be selected after two tests. Soon he figured out why they selected him.

At that time, the FBI was working on catching some New York Mafia bosses. They had the bosses under surveillance and were able to plant a mole within the organization. The Mafia was involved in money laundering and contract killing, but their big business was importing cocaine from Columbia. The New York bosses had outsourced the nitty-gritty of the importing process to those in Catanzaro, Italy. The Catanzaro people dealt with the bosses in Columbia, and they managed the ships that sailed from near Bogota and ended somewhere on the shores of North Carolina, unmonitored by the Coast Guard. Someone from New York would drive to Carolina in a big van, and the cocaine would later be distributed on the streets of New York. Money would then move from New York to Rome, laundered through a business that looked legitimate. The guys in Catanzaro would send the money to Bogota in small installments. The business had been working smoothly for years, and the FBI was determined to break it. With the information from the mole, the FBI conducted a few raids and arrested many members of the Mafia but not the top bosses; they were

suspicious that the bosses might have figured out the mole's true identity, so he had to be taken off the case.
The FBI contacted the CIA to help monitor the criminals in Catanzaro, and that was why Ross was recruited. It was his familiarity with the Catanzaro area and his knowledge of the Italian language that pushed the envelope in his favor.
After two months of training in Virginia, Ross was sent to Catanzaro; he was happy to be back in the area and even tried to contact his old girlfriend. Ross was given the address of a bar that was frequented by the Catanzaro criminals who worked with the New York bosses. Ross went to the bar a few times and watched the men but did not approach them; they looked formidable.
A few days later, his former Italian girlfriend, Rosa, called back. He went back to the bar with her, and this time, with a local girl by his side, he felt more confident. He talked to the men and bought them drinks.
Ross later spoke to the bosses in Langley about his progress, and it was decided that Ross and his girlfriend would move to the safe house on the beach.
It was a two-story house located two hundred feet away from the water, strategically surrounded by small trees and a high fence. It had no veranda, and a tiny wooden board was placed at the gate with the words 'Villa Cicero' inscribed on it. The house had four bedrooms, two of which held communication devices and computers, and the third one had weaponry and ammunition. Only the fourth bedroom had a bed, which was used by occasional guests. Before Ross moved in, the house was properly cleaned and bugged with tiny video cameras. Some computers and gadgets were stowed in closets, and some were taken to other locations.
Two weeks later, Ross invited his new friends to the beach house. The agency instructed Ross to tell them that he had a big wine business and was considering moving to Italy permanently.
The Catanzaro Mafia guys started using the CIA safe house as a party place, got drunk, and told Ross exactly what they did for living and who they worked with. The people at Langley were watching and listening in real time. Ross wore an undetectable earbud and microphone. Every step he took, every sentence he spoke, was being dictated to him from Langley.
One day, Peter, the big guy among the ruffians, bragged to Ross that he controlled businesses all over the world and detailed how and where a small

ship would reach American shores, before dancing with Rosa as music blared. After dancing for a while, Peter became tired and sat on the sofa. Ross sat next to him and quietly questioned him about how he would be paid for the American shipment. The man told Ross details about who would send the payments, how many there would be and to which banks they would be sent.

Langley listened to the conversation through the tiny microphone lodged inside Ross's ear. The CIA passed all that information to the FBI.

Later, the FBI watched as a van picked up the bags filled with cocaine from the deserted seashore in North Carolina. The FBI watched the van make a few stops and drop a few bags at each location. The vehicles made a final stop in Brooklyn.

The FBI followed the money transactions that took place between banks in New York and Rome.

A few days later, there was a news story on the TV that claimed that the FBI had managed to infiltrate and bring down a complete network of Mafia and drug lords.

Ross boarded a plane bound for America the day he was given clearance by the agency. Once he reached home, he swore that he would never visit Italy again. After a week off, spent relaxing at his Florida home, he went back to Langley and confronted his boss. "You've got to give me a desk job. I can't go back to the field."

"You have to do at least three field jobs," his boss replied rudely, "before you can be considered for a desk job. It was in your employment contract. Go back and read it. You were trained for operations."

"I was shitting in my pants when you guys were giving me instructions and I had to tell those guys whatever you wanted me to say. Those people were dangerous. If they'd found out I was a spook, they would've killed me right there and then. Training is something, but standing in front of the enemy, facing death, is something entirely different."

"You were not alone. All our employees do that on a regular basis. Men and women. You have no choice."

"In that case, I will have to resign. I'll go and work for my dad."

His boss frowned and said, "Let me talk to my boss. I'll get back to you by the end of the day."

Ross would later come to know that his boss had decided to let him go. But when his boss had discussed it with a senior manager, he was urged to keep

Ross on the payroll, due to the high-profile nature of the case Ross had worked on.
That first mission had been fifteen years ago, and now Ross had a good life, managing people at the agency, holding a position just two levels below Lazarus's deputy director post. But Ross was an ambitious man, and that ambition grew manyfold when Brushback became a member of the Senate Intelligence Committee. His dad had not only made hefty contributions to the senator's campaigns, but he had made many of his rich friends contribute as well, and now it was time for Brushback to return the favor.

IT WAS A cold but pleasant day in December. Doerr gazed at the naked trees as he walked with Gayle in Central Park, where hawkers were showing their food items and tourists were sauntering about.
Gayle purchased a hot dog, took a few bites and offered the rest to Doerr. Doerr bit off a big piece and realized that he was walking by the spot where the DEA administrator's body had dropped dead, a month back. The soil around that place seemed more barren to him. Doerr knew the powerful man was survived by two teenage children. A pang hit him in the chest. He felt a sudden desire to tell everything to his wife. He thought he was committing a sin by withholding things from her.
"Do you like it?" Gayle asked.
"Like what?"
"The hot dog, silly."
"Yeah, I like it," said Doerr and rubbed his palms.
"Let's sit someplace."
"Let's go over there." Doerr took her to a corner. When they got there, they realized the empty bench was covered in ample amounts of bird poop. "Do you want to sit here or over there?" Doerr pointed to the grass, most of which was dead.
"Let's go there." Gayle walked to the grass; she sat down, and Doerr followed.
He settled next to her with his shoulder touching hers. He could see the CNN building and the other tall structures around it.
Doerr looked into her hazel eyes, took her right hand, and held it between his palms, and gave it a soft rub.

“This is the best time of the year. Don’t you think?” Gayle asked. “The weather is nice, and people are too. I think we should come here every year during the holidays. What do you say?”
“Yeah, we should.” He decided to tell her everything and felt bad that he was about to ruin the moment for her. But telling her about his last assassination was something he had to do. The ball of grief in his chest was growing like a monster. He felt his feet were becoming bogged down in a sea of mud. “Gayle,” he said, “there is something I have to tell you. I’m just hurting too much, keeping it inside.”
“What is it?” Looking concerned, Gayle placed her arm on his shoulder. She gave him a stare and pursed her lips. “Tell me.”
“You must have read about the DEA administrator being murdered, right here in this park?”
“Yes. My mother showed it to me. But why are you asking about that?”
“I…Gayle, I–” Doerr sighed and lowered his head.
“What!” Gayle almost shouted and then lowered her voice. “You what?”
“It was me who took the shot, Gayle. From over there.” He pointed to the building on Fifth Avenue. He held her face in his palms and stroked the tiny gold earrings that hung from her earlobes. “I killed him from there. But Samuel duped me into it.”
“Samuel?” Her jaw dropped. “Isn’t he your colleague?”
“Was.” Doerr told her everything. He explained how the whole thing happened and how the CIA had confirmed that Samuel didn’t work for them anymore and then how his boss Lazarus threw him out of the Langley office and treated him like a street dog.
“Now I’m not sure what I should do next. I just had to tell you, Gayle. And I’m sorry I’m putting you through this. But you are the only person I could tell. Now Samuel has killed the woman who used to live there.” Doerr pointed to the building again. “The FBI is investigating. Maybe they’ll find Samuel soon.”
Her nostrils flared, and her chest heaved up and down with her heavy breathing. Her face became cherry red; she was angry. “But if they find Samuel, next they will come for you. Isn’t that true?”
Doerr nodded. “True. But I didn’t really do anything. I thought I was just following my boss’s orders.”
“What’s going to happen, Max?” Gayle took his hand and pressed it against her cheek. Her anger started melting, and the color of her face was returning

to normal. “I’m so scared. Did you tell Lazarus?”
“I told him everything except the fact that I killed the DEA top man.”
“I don’t know what to say.” Gayle sat there with her mouth agape. “I feel terrible.”

DOERR WOKE UP late, as usual. Gayle had already left for work. Doerr touched his smartphone, and the screen lit up. An icon indicated that there was a message waiting for him. He checked it promptly; it was a message from Lazarus – asking him to call back.
“Hello.” Lazarus picked up on the second ring.
“Listen,” Lazarus said after pleasantries. “I thought about you after you left the other day. I felt bad. I will never forget that you saved my life in Saudi Arabia. I talked to my boss, Stonewall, about taking you back into the CIA, and she finally agreed.”
“I never said I wanted to rejoin the CIA,” Doerr said tersely. “I just needed some access to your data and facilities to track Samuel down.”
“But the only way you can have access is if you become our employee.”
“So if I join your agency, you let me go after Samuel?”
“Yes, but there is a condition.”
“What is it?”
“The condition is,” Lazarus cleared his throat, “give and take. You have to complete a few of our assignments before we let you go after Samuel, and this is a condition set forth by Director Stonewall herself. We are swamped with field work, and as you know, most of our employees don’t like to go to the field. Almost everybody wants to sit on their ass at Langley.”
“By ‘a few assignments,’ how many do you mean?” Doerr came to the point.
“Four.”
“I will do two operations. Then I go after Samuel.”
“You will have to do three ops. That’s the minimum.”
“Okay, three,” Doerr said.
“But before any of your operations begin, you will have to come to the Virginia training center for a week. You will be trained on tactical shooting and deadly force decisions. I don’t think you have to relearn anything. So consider it a vacation. And at the end you will get the details of your first

assignment; it will be in Paris, and the second op will be in Amsterdam. You will be working directly for me, just like before."
"Okay."
"And one more thing."
"Yes." *More strings*, Doerr thought.
"Keep the news about Samuel's disloyalty to yourself. Only a few people at the top know that Samuel doesn't work for us anymore. As you know, we don't advertise this sort of thing, and we try to take care of it ourselves. Otherwise, the FBI would be arresting somebody from our agency every day."
"No problem. I know," Doerr said glumly. "Do you know what Samuel is up to these days?"
"The last I heard about him is that he has joined hands with the cartels in Mexico."
It made sense to Doerr, who hadn't been able to think of a reason why he had removed the DEA chief, but he had a reputation of being tough on drug smugglers. "One more question, Lazarus. Where are his buddies, Victor and Len?"
"They left the agency right after Samuel did."
Doerr sighed. "Thanks." He hung up. The strings of confusion untangled themselves and took shape in his mind; everything made sense to him now. Samuel, Len and Victor left the agency to do freelance work for the cartels, which was much more profitable than being government employees. Samuel duped Doerr into killing the top drug enforcement man with a single shot. The DEA administrator was known to be tough. He was arming DEA agents with advanced firearms and deploying more of them to the border, and the result was a twenty percent drop in drug shipments from Mexico to the US. Doerr knew all that.
The cartels abhorred that. Samuel must have been paid a bundle for the hit. Doerr felt excited about really rejoining the CIA. Losing his son was the hardest thing he had ever had to deal with, and to be moving forward felt good.
Finally, a ray of hope was coming. He knew that the moments of happiness could be fleeting, so to share the joy, he called Gayle immediately.

LAZARUS WAS RIGHT. The training at Langley was a cakewalk. Doerr was lumped with nine other trainees, and all ten of them were kept in the guest house of the training site in rural Virginia. The trainees met over a brunch on their first day.

Most of them were young, certainly younger than twenty-five; there was only one guy who was a little older. It reminded Doerr about the time when he had trained with the CIA back in the mid-nineties. He had been twenty-two years old, fresh out of college. He had trained at a Pennsylvania training site sandwiched between two hills. The only way in was a dirt road that connected to a local street, just off the I-80 highway. His mother had been healthy back then. Initially, he had told her that he was joining the Army. After two weeks of training, his mother had insisted repeatedly that she wanted to visit him at the training center.

"Why can't I come?" she had argued. "I have a friend in North Carolina. She goes to her son's Army training center all the time." At that point, Doerr had to tell her that he was with the CIA and not the Army, and no civilians were allowed to visit the training site.

Doerr sat in the cafeteria of the new training center on Sunday night. It was seven p.m., and there was only one server there, a woman who looked to be just older than thirty.

"What is good at this time of the day?" Doerr asked her.

"Grilled chicken sandwich is good. Or you can go with macaroni. We have pizza, too."

"I'll have macaroni and a bottle of Snapple." Doerr paid with cash.

Ten minutes later he sat at the table, munching the stale macaroni. The next day, the training would start. He took a sip from his Snapple bottle, and the older trainee came and sat next to him.

Doerr chit-chatted with the guy through his dinner and later went to bed early.

The first day of training was on marksmanship. Doerr was more experienced in many areas than the trainer, who was little taller than Doerr, may be six-six or six-eight. But he was skinny and weighed no more than a hundred and ninety, may be two hundred pounds. In the morning the training was on how to shoot a pistol when the target was at a distance of more than a hundred feet, what to do when there were innocent bystanders, how to avoid civilian casualties.

In the afternoon, they were taught how to maintain firearms. “A poorly maintained gun is as dangerous to the shooter as it is to the target,” the trainer said. There was an embarrassing incident when the trainer unassembled an assault rifle and he wanted to show Doerr and others how to reassemble it. But the trainer was having trouble putting it back together. The magazine release button just would not fit.

“If it doesn’t work,” the coach said smartly, “you have to disassemble the firearm and start over.”

The trainer took the rifle apart and tried to fit it back together again, and he failed. Doerr waited for a while, and then he had to take over and show them how it was really done.

The trainer smartly said to the other men, “When you are stuck with something, get some help from your coworker. That’s the lesson here.”

Doerr saw the older trainee trying to suppress his laughter.

AFTER COMPLETING HIS so-called training, Doerr boarded a plane to Paris, where the first operation was to take place. It was a bright morning when he arrived.

Doerr walked out of the elevator and was walking fiercely to his hotel room. He felt a little edgy, given that he had been out of real, *legitimate* action for a while.

His target, Al Hashemi, was a known terrorist with connections all over the world – Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Somalia, Yemen, Pakistan, the UK, France and many more.

Doerr had gotten rid of many in the past that were on their way to harm America. Their vile faces were frozen in his memory like the cereal boxes on the grocery store shelves. He could read them, count them, and sometimes those faces appeared in his dreams.

Doerr reached his hotel room, swiped the card, opened the door and closed it behind him. He opened his bag and assembled the M16 rifle and clamped the telescopic sight to it in just forty seconds, a perfection achieved by practice.

He waited and waited at the window. But two hours later, there was still no sign of Al Hashemi. *What happened to the bastard? I was told he would be out within an hour.*

After the long wait, he had to do something.

He picked up his phone and dialed the hotel number, speaking to the hotel clerk in French. “I will be arriving at the hotel in ten minutes. I’m meeting with Al Hashemi. Can you please let him know, urgently, for me?” It was all lies. He was already in the hotel, in his own room.
“Wait a second,” the operator answered. “Let me call him.”
A minute later the operator came back on the line. “Sir, he is not answering.”
“What’s his room number?” Doerr said.
The operator paused, but Doerr was insistent. “Please, ma’am. His father just died. I have to inform him as soon as possible.” More lies.
“You should contact him directly. We can’t give out that information.”
“Please understand. His family wants to talk to him right now. The only way I can speak to him is if I go to his room.”
“He is in 447,” the operator said grudgingly.
Now Doerr had the man’s room number. He disassembled his rifle and put the parts back into the duffel bag and took out his Glock and a fresh silencer from the suitcase. The gun went to his right pocket and silencer in his left.
He took the elevator to the fourth floor and passed the janitor; soon he stood in front of room 447. The polished wooden door was shut. Knowing the janitor might be watching him, he didn’t risk touching the handle. He knew it would not open anyway.
He kept walking, taking the stairs down to the ground floor. The hotel clerk behind the desk was an old black man, in a suit, with a serious face. Lights from the powerful wall lamp reflected from his rimless glasses. Doerr observed the clerk for a few seconds and decided to head for the bar. Once seated, he ordered a glass of Bordeaux and a sandwich. He sat on a stool and then shifted his position, the silencer in his left pocket making him uncomfortable.
He savored the wine and kept a close eye on the hotel clerk. By the time he had eaten half of his sandwich, a new hotel clerk appeared, an elderly woman. He pressed a button on his phone and whispered, “Is the bird still in its nest?”
“Yes, confirmed. The bird still in nest,” the voice at the other end said.
After paying the bill, he rushed to the hotel clerk. She was a heavyset woman, nails polished in a shiny red, her makeup done perfectly. Doerr could not locate a single wrinkle on her red dress.

He put on the cutest smile he could as he approached the clerk, “Are those real diamonds in your earrings?” He knew the colorless stones were far too large to be worn by a hotel clerk unless she was also the owner or wife of the owner.

“No,” she said with a big smile, “they’re imitation. How can I help you?”

“The thing is,” he reached inside his pocket as if searching for something, “I lost my room key. Can I have a duplicate?” He tried to put up the look of a kid who had just stolen a Snickers bar.

“Room number?” the lady asked.

“447.” The room number of the man he was about to kill.

“Okay.” She took a quick look at the computer, swiped a card on the machine and handed it over.

“Thanks, sweetie.” He gave her another smile and rushed to the elevator. As he walked to room 447, he screwed the silencer to the barrel of his Glock surreptitiously.

Facing the door, he looked once to the right, then to the left. A middle-aged man carrying a suitcase was walking toward him. Doerr didn’t care; he inserted the key and opened the door rapidly, slipping through the gap and closing it behind him even more quickly.

Al Hashemi was a rather short man. He was only five feet five, or maybe even shorter – seven or eight inches shorter than Doerr. His brown beard was as long as his face.

But the man looked strong; his deltoids looked like large rocks. Wearing a white tunic that covered his entire body, except his face, he was sitting on the bed. As soon as he saw Doerr, he extended his hand to the table on his right, trying to pick up the Beretta that lay there in plain sight. Doerr was sure the gun was loaded, and he was ready with his own Glock. In a split second, Doerr took the shot, but he missed the mark, hitting Al Hashemi in the neck instead of the head.

Strong like a bull, Al Hashemi clutched his neck with his left hand and pushed himself with his legs, reaching again for his gun.

Doerr was momentarily distracted as he stumbled on some clothing left on the floor. He raised his gun, but it was late. A bullet came out of Al Hashemi’s Beretta, and it hit Doerr’s hip, shattering his bone. Doerr dropped to the ground, his vision blurring with the pain, the magnitude of which he had never felt before.

Propping himself up on one arm, Doerr squinted through the pain and fired one more shot, which struck Al Hashemi between the eyes. Hashemi slumped, his body crumpled on the bed. A soap advertisement was showing on the muted TV.

Al Hashemi didn't really have a chance against his trained opponent. But this time, Doerr was hurt. Doerr tried to stand up, but the pain in his hip was too great. The agony was spreading through his entire body.

He dropped his gun to the ground, took his cell phone from his pocket, and pushed the redial button. "Bird is down in nest 447. Send a cleanup crew." After a pause, he said, "I've been hit."

The crew arrived shortly, one after another, wearing different disguises – a total of seven of them. Doerr was taken to the safe house in Montrouge and given preliminary care, but the X-ray revealed a badly damaged bone. Under the cover of night, he was taken to a local airport and was airlifted to a state-of-the-art American hospital in Kuwait City.

The lead doctor told him, "You are lucky, Mr. Doerr. Normally we would recommend amputation when there is this much hip bone damage. But, because you have such an athletic body, we think we can save your leg."

After the surgery and months of intense rehabilitation, Doerr was back on his feet. He could do pretty much everything just like before; running was the only activity that gave him a twinge in his leg.

DOERR WAS BACK in New York, continuing his therapy.

"Why don't you take it easy for another month." Lazarus called one day. "Maybe you got a little rusty after being out for a while."

"All the rust is gone, Lazarus," Doerr said. "I have to find my son's killer. I only have pain in my chest. That pain is more intense than anything else."

"We want to make sure you're fine. But…"

"I'm fine, Lazarus," Doerr interrupted. "My leg is fine. I want to go to Amsterdam today and start my operation. I want to go there *today*."

"You can't go today. Maybe next week. I will send the flight and other details."

Doerr hung up the phone. He made some coffee and drank it. He turned all the lights off, sat in a reclining chair, and kept thinking. Darkness helped him to contemplate better.

Samuel's vile face flashed in his mind. Sitting in his apartment was not working, so he decided to take a walk outside and get some fresh air.

He walked for about a mile. His legs felt fine. On his way back he felt a small niggle in his hip, which he was sure would go away soon.

He arrived back at his apartment and heard a beep from his phone. There was a message waiting. He hit the play button and listened.

Max, don't try to be smart. Just do your job and forget about me. What is done is done. If you come after me, there will be consequences. You got injured in Paris, and I'm sure you don't want to be hurt again. So don't look for me. Don't seek revenge.

From the voice, Doerr had no doubt who the caller was – Samuel. Doerr could never forget his voice.

Doerr checked the caller ID. The LCD displayed 'unknown.'

Doerr grabbed the phone and threw it on the floor in frustration. The device shattered into pieces.

Samuel was trying to threaten him. Samuel knew everything Doerr was doing.

But how?

Did Samuel pay off someone in the agency? Maybe a techie, who had access to all the data stored in the computers?

Doerr didn't know, and he didn't care. Catching and killing Samuel was his goal.

BOOK 2

CHAPTER 13

ABU HALIM WAS the eldest among nine sons and four daughters; his father had three wives and had produced many heirs. Halim's affinity for leadership started early in his life. He graduated from the University of Dubai in Business Administration with an eye to take over his father's oil business one day. He proceeded to Oxford Business School for a year, to earn an MBA.

But Halim never finished his MBA. Three months into it, his mother died. Halim immediately returned home, planning to mourn his mother's death alongside his father, only to see his father move on in his life, seemingly without grief, with his two younger wives. Halim cried alone. He remembered those nights when his father had screamed at his mother, and Halim used to put his arms around his mother as his father slammed the door, heading for the bedroom of one of his other wives.

Days and weeks passed after his mother's death. His tears stopped, but the pain in his heart only swelled. The desolation waned only when he took a silent vow in the mosque, while praying, to kill his father and both stepmothers.

The next few weeks he acted in a very friendly way with his younger stepmother, Nasrin. She was just five years older than him. He started having breakfast and dinner with her every day – even reading the *Quran* with her. On a Sunday afternoon, when the whole family was having a gala lunch with shish kabobs, made from halal goat meat, and lamb curry, his father smiled when Halim told him that Nasrin was his new mother. With his lips pursed, Halim also smiled – inside his mind. Outside, he maintained a serious face. His plan was working.

Exactly three months after his mother's death, Halim was having dinner with Nasrin. It was nine p.m., and some of his brothers and sisters were in bed already. During the middle of dinner, one of Nasrin's sons cried and called for her from the next room – the three-year-old boy needed something – and Nasrin abandoned her meal to tend to him. That presented the opportunity Halim had been waiting for. He quickly took out a small bottle from his pocket and poured its contents, succinylcholine, on Nasrin's dinner.

Nasrin came back within a few minutes after placating her son. She adjusted her *niqab* and resumed consuming the rice and chicken curry from

her plate. A few seconds later, she reached for her water glass and drank deeply. She picked up some more rice, but it never made it into her stomach. She pressed her left arm against her chest, struggling to breathe, and then dropped to the floor.

“Call a doctor,” screamed Halim and ran outside. He ran down the lane to the house where the doctor lived. He kept banging on the door. “Doctor, doctor, please come,” he begged. “My *Ummu* is sick.” Halim was surprised by his own acting capability.

The doctor was in bed already. He took minutes to dress, and when he finally came to see Nasrin, it was too late. The doctor checked her pulse and shook his head. Halim cried – inside his head, he laughed with glee.

Nasrin had a blood disease. The doctor had prescribed Coumadin, a blood thinner, but she often neglected to take her medicine and often complained of the leg pain the medicine gave her. After she had been pronounced dead from a heart attack, no one suspected a thing. One day before her funeral, one of Halim’s aunts pointed at Halim and bemoaned, “That boy cannot catch a break.”

After a few months had passed, Ramadan started. If Halim’s father was sad about the deaths of two of his wives, he kept it well hidden. The father was hinting that, at the age of forty-seven, he needed to marry again. Halim’s father ate like a pig at the *Iftar*, the meal at the end of the day-long fast. The father ate at least twenty dates and consumed a pound of goat meat every day. He had the habit of taking a walk outside after the big meal and enjoying a solitary smoke. He wasn’t aware that Halim had been following him with an eight-inch-long serrated knife hidden in his pocket.

It was three days before the end of Ramadan. The moon was hiding, and the street was dark. Halim’s father took a deep drag from his America-made cigarette, when most people in the neighborhood were praying or sleeping inside their house. The father brought the cigarette to his dark lips, unaware that death was closing in.

Halim watched his father walk by the house that was under construction. A ladder stood leaning against the three-story building. The steel rods poked out of the concrete pillars, and the roof was yet to be finished. Halim took one last look around to make sure no one was watching, and then he sprinted toward his father. Halim grabbed the old man by his neck, shoved him inside the half-built house, and with his strong arms, threw him to the

ground. As his father fell to the soil, his father's head hit the edge of a brick; the father wrapped his arms around his head and shrieked in pain. Halim sat on his father's chest. "Why?" he asked his father in a hushed but angry voice.

"You, Halim?" the father said in a shocked voice. "Why what?"

"You don't know?" Halim plunged the knife into his father's chest. "You disrespected my mother."

Halim was sure that the knife pierced the older man's heart the first time. But he stabbed him two more times, right under the sternum, and then moved off his father's chest carefully, so as not to get any of the copious amount of blood on his clothes. His father's body was limp. Halim watched the motionless body for a minute. His father's unfinished cigarette smoldered close to his body, a trail of smoke drifting up through the air. Halim stooped and sliced the dead man's throat out of anger, and wiped the knife clean on his dead father's striped shirt before placing it back in his pocket. He pulled out his father's wallet and took all the dirham notes and then threw the wallet next to the dead body. He carefully walked out of the house after looking around one more time.

Halim felt neither happy nor sad when he read the third-page report in the *Khaleej Times* which detailed how his father, a respectable and successful businessman, was stabbed to death under the cover of darkness by a robber, just for a few hundred dirhams. The report cried foul of the deteriorating law and order situation in the city.

After his father's death, the responsibility to run the family business fell on Halim's shoulders as he was the eldest son. It was arduous for him to take over his father's business, as he had never looked into it before. But he knew this was something that had to be done, and he worked twelve to fourteen hours a day. During this period, most of the partners and the men who had helped run the business were supportive of Halim. But there were a few who weren't and questioned Halim's capability. Halim marked all those enemies and later eliminated them from his company one by one. About a year after his father's death, he had good control over the large oil business that his father had built over twenty years. He did not forget that his other stepmother was yet to be taken care of. The woman was a mother to three boys and a girl. The youngest son was just a year and half old, but that did not deter Halim.

A month later, he employed the same method of adding succinylcholine to food about to be eaten by his stepmother. After her death, many in the extended family were relieved that the widow died a natural death, paving the way for Halim to be the eldest person in the family.

Halim shed tears of joy and relief at the funeral, which people read as a sign of sadness. Later, he prayed in a mosque near his house. He fulfilled the promise he had made to himself little more than a year ago, to deliver death to his father and two stepmothers. With his knees on the ground, he bent his body to touch the ground with his head and thanked Allah for strength he had in himself, and tears soaked the ground.

When Halim took over his father's business in the early nineties, the world economy was booming and so were the United Arab Emirates. The total revenue from his father's business back then was around five hundred million dollars. He invested the huge profits from oil extraction into shipping, construction, real estate and agriculture. Within five years, his company's revenue approached a billion dollars.

What Halim did to his business next was construed as strange by many. He broke it up into six smaller companies and transferred ownership of five of them to his five trusted brothers, keeping one for himself. He gave the biggest company to his favorite brother Raafiq, who not only ran it well but also helped Halim raise money for his passion – to attack America. Unlike Halim's other brothers, Raafiq was smart and well educated, and he could speak English and French fluently, but Raafiq had a vice; he liked Caucasian women and ignored the four wives he had in Dubai, but Halim forgave him.

Halim continued to control how the business was being conducted as the brothers were completely loyal to him. Halim married a sixteen-year-old girl, who never forgot to wear her burqa and read the *Quran* eight times a day. Halim transferred the ownership of the sixth company to her. Now, officially, he owned nothing, except a few real estate properties, but everyone in town knew Halim owned the entire conglomerate.

During the late nineties, Halim wanted to buy two new oil rigs, right outside Dubai, but was outbid by an American oil company. After that incident, his hatred for America increased exponentially. He reached out to the local Intifada group that decried America every day, and he funneled large amounts of cash to them. But Halim soon realized that the local group was

all talk, and its leaders were simply pocketing most of the cash; they did little to really harm America.

Halim made contacts with Hamas, al-Qaeda, and other like-minded terrorist groups and started funneling money to them. Soon, he was interacting with the top tier leaders of Hamas and al-Qaeda.

He invested his money away from home – bought stakes in a bank in Zurich, a retailer in London, a technology business in India, a fashion designer in Paris, a publishing house in New York and oil firms in Libya and Riyadh. The investments were not made with making money in mind, he had plenty already; they were made so that he could travel virtually anywhere in the world with impunity.

Halim was overjoyed when al-Qaeda attacked the USS *Cole* in October 2000, killing seventeen Americans. The following month he met Osama Bin Laden in Afghanistan, and Zawahiri, the second top-man in al-Qaeda back then.

In 2001, he traveled to London, Paris, Manila, Rome, Zurich, Riyadh, Oslo and Kuwait City. On paper, the trips were for business, but in reality, he went to gather cash for terrorist organizations. The rich America-haters in Western countries sent money in small amounts to banks in Riyadh, Kuwait City, London, and Frankfurt. Money would then be transferred to Halim's accounts in Zurich, all transactions masked to mimic payments for commodities traded by Halim's companies.

In November 2001, Halim held a lunch meeting in Bahnhofstrasse, Zurich and invited the financers and the terrorists. It had only been two months since 9/11, and the Western world was angry. Muslim leaders decried the attacks, and many were fearful of the Western action that was sure to follow. Halim knew that a section of the Muslim population condoned it, and that section included ultra-rich Muslims around the world, and Halim was determined to get their money and route it to the right people.

A meeting was held, over caviar and the most expensive smoked salmon so that the capital-providers could get a firsthand account of the progress being made by the terrorists against America.

A black-suited burly man, from Riyadh, leaned back in his chair and took a sip of the fine Petrus vintage wine and threw a quick glance at the beautiful view of Lake Zurich through the window as he listened to the al-Qaeda point-person from Pakistan.

“We must recruit heavily in Iraq,” the al-Qaeda leader said. “Americans are going there. It will be a killing fest.”
“Don’t you think it is too soon?” the burly man asked and rolled his eyes as twenty other men, including Halim, watched.
“What do you know about timing?” the al-Qaeda man said angrily. “Have you ever fought on the ground? Or taken aim with a rifle? Do you know how it feels to be living in a cave?”
“Calm down, calm down,” Halim interrupted. “I know we need to recruit in Iraq. But right now the Americans are raining bombs in Afghanistan and killing innocents. And we need to protect the top al-Qaeda leaders.”
The burly man and the al-Qaeda man silently nodded.
“Now.” Halim turned to the burly man. “How much money can you offer this month?”
“Seven hundred thousand dollars,” the burly man said. “Business has slowed down since September.”
“One point two million,” another man at the table said.
Halim noted down all the numbers on a piece of paper and then added them up. “Total collection is twenty-three point four million,” he said. Then he wrote ‘6.6 million’; that was how much he was going to give. He wrote ‘thirty million’ at the bottom of the paper and drew a circle around it.
“This is how much we are going to have.” He raised the piece of paper in his hand so that everyone at the table could see it.
“Thank you,” a chorus of voices said. “Lion of Dubai.”
That meeting happened more than five years ago. And now Halim was known as the financer, the Lion of Dubai in terrorist circles, and he loved it. The nickname made him feel like a king.

CHAPTER 14

When Lazarus entered Stonewall’s room, she sat, leaning back in her black leather chair, deep in thought. A report from the intelligence chief of the UAE, which she had finished reading a few minutes before, was playing in her mind. Looking out through the window, she barely noticed Lazarus walking in.

Lazarus cleared his throat. Stonewall turned to face him and showed him the chair.

“How is the Amsterdam work going?” Stonewall asked. “Is Doerr able to do his job?”

“Doerr is doing quite well. He is almost done,” Lazarus said. “He should return in a few days. Consider the job complete.”

“Good.” Stonewall moved forward and placed her elbows on the table. “I am worried about this report I just received from Kassem.”

“What does the report say?” Lazarus asked.

Stonewall clasped her hands together and said, “It is about the Lion of Dubai. We have tried everything. We unleashed the Israelis and the Saudis, but he knows how to evade each of them.”

“He goes to Saudi Arabia a lot,” Lazarus said, turning in his chair. “How come they can’t get him?”

“You know how it is over there, one branch goes after the terrorists and another branch tips them off before the raid. And this asshole is unmarried, which I find really very hard to believe. He must have a couple of wives tucked away somewhere. Anyway, the point is, this guy is well respected by many, including religious leaders, especially because how much money he gives away.”

“True, but he gives most of his money to terrorists. Doesn’t he? To folks in Nigeria, Egypt, Pakistan, according to the last report I read. We should really go after the people who give *him* the money.”

“I couldn’t agree with you more. But even that has proved hard, since he has multiple legitimate companies around the world that do legal business. It is hard to make out which money is legal and which isn’t. I have information here that he will be in Riyadh next month. The Saudis are getting ready to arrest him, but I don’t have much hope.”

“I have the right person in mind who can take down Halim.”

Stonewall didn't take the hint, and they continued to talk about the Lion of Dubai until Lazarus brought the same issue back again. "I think Doerr will be a good option for this kind of operation."
"I don't think so," Stonewall disagreed. "We need someone who we can completely trust. Someone who has worked with the agency for a very long time, and whose loyalty is beyond question. This Lion of Dubai is a very crafty man. Since we killed Osama Bin Laden, he has become operationally involved in various terrorist operations. Earlier, Halim just used to provide funds. But now it appears he is planning a direct hit on US soil, but we don't know the details. We need to bring this guy down."
"The intel chief of the UAE is a good guy. Let us send Doerr and another operative to Dubai. Let them work together. I am sure something good will come of it."
"You really have a lot of confidence in this Doerr guy, don't you?" Stonewall said.
"Yes, I do." Lazarus looked at Stonewall through the corner of his eye. "Trust me on this one. When he takes up a job, he does not think about anything else. He is totally focused and unafraid. He is one of the best that the agency has produced. He isn't called *the assassin* for nothing."
"Okay, let me think about it. I'll talk to some other people and make a decision." Stonewall smiled. "I am going to miss you, Lazarus, after you retire. You'll be leaving in less than a year, right?"
"Yes, ten months and nineteen days, to be exact. Have you decided who you are going to pick as deputy director once I leave?"
"Yes and no; I have some names in my mind. But I haven't decided yet," Stonewall said. The phone started ringing. Stonewall leaned toward the phone, saw the caller ID on the LCD display and said, "I have to take this. Thanks for coming by."
"Thanks, Madam Director." Lazarus rose to leave Stonewall's office.
"You're welcome," Stonewall said to Lazarus and picked up the phone.
"Hello, Senator Brushback. How are you?"
After pleasantries, the senator quickly got to the point. "I think Ross Calpone will make a great deputy director. He is a good communicator, and he knows how to motivate people. I say let us groom him for the job. We have almost a year in hand."
"Ross may be good in certain areas, but I don't think I will pick him for the job. I dug into his file." This was not the first time Brushback had tried to

con Stonewall. But she knew how to deal with him and play the tough game with the senator. She had encountered many men like Brushback while she was in the Army. She neither rejoiced in such encounters nor was she afraid. “He was ready to quit after just one field job, and the only reason he was kept and promoted was that the case he worked on was a high-profile case and very successful.”
“So there you said it. He can bring success. Don’t you think we need someone like him to jump-start things at the agency?”
“Well, the job that ended up well fifteen years back was because it was planned very well by the people at Langley. Ross contributed very little, really.”
“Mrs. Stonewall, I strongly suggest that you choose Ross unless you want to have a hard time in the briefing meetings from now on.”
“How dare you talk to me like that?” Stonewall said angrily and sat up straight. “Are you trying to force in Ross because his father and his buddies contribute heavily in your campaigns?”
“That’s preposterous.”
“Preposterous? I have your campaign contribution list right here. Do you want me to read it to you?” Stonewall slammed the phone down.

DOERR BOARDED A KLM flight from Schiphol airport, heading for JFK. His job in Amsterdam was done. The plane journey was as uneventful and boring as the cab ride to his apartment in New York. It was early morning when he returned, and he could hear the birds chirping.
Once home, Doerr woke up Gayle. She made some coffee and breakfast for him. After a chat, Doerr hit the bed, hoping for some sleep. But he felt restless, thinking about whether the NYPD detective had made any progress with Billy’s case. He wanted to go to the police department right away, but he was aware that they would not be open till nine a.m.
Putting on a black leather jacket over his jeans, he started out at eight thirty the next morning. The police station was within walking distance. At nine thirty, Doerr met the detective, who opened a file and rummaged through some papers. Doerr knew what that kind of behavior meant. The detective did not have any good news.
“Let me check something.” The detective pretended to read some report, and then he put the paper down. “Mr. Doerr,” the detective shifted in his

chair and obviously felt uncomfortable, “we got all forensic reports. And… and we have reached a wall.”
“What happens now?” Doerr asked, hoping for something positive.
“I am afraid, sir, without any further information or tips,” the detective paused and took a deep breath, “I am afraid that we will have to close this case.”
Doerr rose without saying anything. He was angry and frustrated but tried to keep his emotions inside. He turned to leave.
“Wait,” the detective said.
“What is it?”
The detective cleared his throat and then said, “We have Billy’s things that we took from the murder scene. Our forensic department is done with those. Let me go and get them.”
The detective left, and two minutes later, he returned with a box in his hands. Doerr took it and opened the case as the detective gave him a sympathetic pat on the shoulder. As he took the box, his eyes became moist, but he controlled himself so tears wouldn’t fall.
Inside were Billy’s wallet, his iPhone, a few pens, coins, two notebooks, and a few other items.
Doerr promptly returned home and laid the box on a table. He sat silently on the sofa, staring at the case. Sadness filled his heart, and life felt meaningless to him. He walked into the bedroom and sat on the stool in front of his piano; he started playing the Mozart symphony number forty in silent mode.
He played for an hour, but it did little to alleviate his melancholy. It was lunchtime, but he did not feel like eating anything; he went back to the living room and peeked into the box that held Billy’s stuff. He picked up the iPhone and turned it on. There was very little charge left on its battery. Doerr played some of the audio recordings. Billy liked to read aloud from his book and then listen to it later during a walk or train ride.
“I gotta go.” That was Billy’s voice, and then there was a silence. Then the sound of a scuffle could be heard, and then there was silence again. Then Billy asked something, and somebody said, “Where is your father?”
That must be the murderer! The voice was familiar. He played it again.
“Where is your father?”
Doerr knew that voice. “Samuel,” Doerr yelped, walked to the glass door, and then to the balcony.

“Samuel!” Doerr screamed and punched the glass door. The glass cracked and gouged his knuckles, blood gushing from his shredded skin.
“Samuel!” he screamed and threw the iPhone.
It was all too clear now. Samuel killed Billy so that Doerr would be restless and would easily fall into his elaborate trap. Samuel used him to kill the DEA administrator to collect a hefty sum. But now, Doerr swore, he would do anything to get Samuel. His two missions – to find and eliminate his son’s killer and to kill Samuel – had become one and the same.

IT WAS A bitter cold Sunday morning in January. The temperature on the display board showed 37 degrees. Doerr picked up his groceries and headed home with the yellow plastic bags dangling from his hands. Some people on the road to his apartment wore sweaters, most wore a jacket of some kind; one young man walked around in shorts, eager to show his vitality.
Doerr didn’t like the flu-infested, often ice-covered, cold January month at the best of times, let alone when he was carrying groceries.
He’d made a promise to Gayle before their marriage that he would always pick up the groceries. To him, a promise was just that – a promise. It didn’t change with time, situation or anything else. Gayle had volunteered to do the grocery shopping many times, but he wouldn’t let her. To overcome the problem, Gayle had often stocked up before Doerr came home.
The five grocery bags in one hand and four in the other would have been strenuous for anyone else but not for him. He carried them easily and passed Rosco Video, the cheap DVD store that sold Russian movies for $2.99 a pop. As Doerr took the next step, his eyes fell on the beggar wearing a torn jacket, which was so pale that it was hard to tell what its original color was.
Doerr stopped at the beggar, dropped the grocery bags and took out his wallet. *How does this man survive in such temperatures without catching bronchitis?* He wondered.
He glanced at the old slippers on the man’s feet. He dropped three twenty-dollar bills and pointed to the shoe shop across the road and said, “Get a pair of shoes.”
The man said nothing but raised the dollar bills as a token of thanks.
Doerr nodded as he picked up his bags and slowly walked away. When he reached his apartment and pressed the switch for the doorbell, he panted a

little. Gayle opened the door at one ring of the bell.
He gently dropped the bags on the floor and asked, “Will this be enough for a week?”
“Of course, but will your stay at Langley be longer than a week?”
“I don’t know. But the possibility is always there. They can send me somewhere for one week, one month or even longer.”
“But if you have to go out of the country for an assignment,” Gayle said, touching his shoulder, “you will come home before going, won’t you?”
“Maybe not.” Doerr laughed. “They can send me to the other side of the world with just a few seconds’ notice.”
“I’m worried, Max. Aren’t you?”
“I am. I worry if they will let me work on Samuel or not. If they do, when will it be? I just can’t stop thinking about him.” Doerr clenched his fists. “I feel he is getting away little by little every day, and I can’t do anything about it. Sometimes I feel he is following me and laughing at me.”
“Maybe you should stop thinking about him.”
“How can I?” Doerr looked at her eyes. “I always have chest pain. Samuel seems to be sitting on my chest all the time.”
“But when you find him, what are you going to do?”
“I am going to put a fifty-caliber bullet through his fucking head. Just like he made me do. Then I will lacerate his body with a knife, just like he did to my son.”
“But will that be the right thing to do? Max?”
“That’s the way it should end. Justice, due process – those are for books. After I kill him, I will walk into the Edgar Hoover building and tell the FBI everything. If they think I’m guilty of something, let them punish me. But I will kill Samuel. He deserves no other end.”
“But then what will happen to you? To me?” Gayle cocked her head. “There will be no peace in your life. Our life.”
“Peace is not in living a long life. It is in knowing that you have done the right thing.”
Gayle stood there silently and nodded after a few thoughtful seconds.

STONEWALL SCHEDULED A five p.m. meeting with Lazarus using the Outlook mail system. She left the location field blank and hit the send button at exactly 4:55 p.m. She immediately received the acceptance

notification from Lazarus. Usually, Lazarus came to her office for such discussions. But today she decided to make an exception and headed for his office instead.
His office was just as big as hers. The furniture was a little downscale. On the right wall, there was a white projector screen that was a foot shorter than the one in her room. In the left corner there was an old-style TV; her room had a seventy-inch flat-screen TV that hung on the wall.
“Good afternoon.” Lazarus raised his face from the laptop that lay on the squeaky clean glass table as Stonewall took a seat on the wooden chair. “What can I do for you today?”
“The bank for the terrorists…we need to close it down.”
“Which bank are you talking about?”
“The bank of the Lion of Dubai. And not just the bank. We need to take the Lion down too. During my predecessor’s term, Halim took money from others and gave it freely to Hamas, al-Qaeda, al-Shabaab and many other terrorist outfits. There is a rumor that he made money in that process.”
Lazarus nodded. “Yes, we have known him for some time. He has provided money for many terrorist activities. Bombing in Cairo, training in Somalia, stabbing in London – just to name a few. We have always ignored him because we knew the terrorists are going to get money from somewhere. So far he himself has not taken part in any action. And we’ve been going for bigger fish.”
“If you and the previous director gave enough attention to Halim,” Stonewall’s tone was sarcastic, “I wouldn’t be here with a ton of baggage.”
“I know. Why don’t we hit him with one of our drones?” Lazarus asked as he lifted his face.
Stonewall bit her lower lip, then said, “Drones are preferable. But the problem is we don’t know where the bastard is right now. The images we have are all old. We have asked the Dubai intel chief to find out where Halim is hiding.”
“I met the chief a year back.” Lazarus leaned back in his chair. “He is a capable man. He can take care of things. I trust him. I was talking to him last week about an unrelated matter. He doesn’t throw camel shit.”
“I agree, but this is a very serious matter. We have to send our own team to find out where Halim is now. Tell Doerr that he has to head for Dubai right away and get to the bottom of this. A very capable field officer from Italy will join him in Dubai.”

Lazarus looked surprised. “I thought you didn’t like Doerr. Why did you choose him?”
“I didn’t,” said Stonewall and paused. She touched the glass paperweight and said, “It was an order from the president himself.”
“You’re kidding.”
“Nope, he somehow knew Doerr’s story. He never liked that senator from Ohio. What’s his name?”
“Kubrick.”
“Yes, Kubrick. The president fought with him when they both were in the Senate. He called me. The president knows how dangerous this Halim guy can be. He asked me to send Doerr to Dubai, ASAP.”
“But didn’t you hint you could find a better person for this job?”
“Good question,” Stonewall said. “I discussed it with the president. He argued for Doerr. He argued that Doerr is good, and he is an unknown commodity where he is going to go.”
“And what is he going to do once he finds Halim?”
“Bring him to justice, of course.”
“That means put two bullets through his head. Right?”
“The president was lecturing me that we have to be civilized. He wants us to bring him here and try him in a court of law.”
Lazarus laughed. “And we are going to do that?”
“Of course not. I would like to talk to Doerr once he gets back.”
“Sure. I will arrange the meeting,” said Lazarus. “Another thing, will you let me handle this case? I will manage the whole thing and report to you any way you want.”
“Are you sure?” Stonewall pursed her lips. “Do you wish to handle the whole shebang? I mean, you are so close to retirement. It may not be finished by the time your retirement day comes.”
“Please, madam,” Lazarus said desperately. “Let me manage this one. So I can tell my grandkids, someday.”
“Okay, if you want it so badly. But I need a daily report every day, by three p.m. Got it?”
“No problem,” Lazarus said, and Stonewall rose to leave.
“Thank you, Madam Director,” Lazarus said as she stepped out.

CHAPTER 15

Zakir Kassem was over six feet tall, with broad shoulders and a thick beard that made him look bigger than he really was. He was strong; he could take down any muscleman all by himself. But that was not the reason he was appointed the intelligence chief of Dubai Police Force. He was a direct descendant of the Al Maktoum family; that was not the whole reason for his meteoric ascent into power, but it had definitely helped. Kassem had served in the country's military, where he rose to the rank of lieutenant general in five years. He was sent to Pakistan to train with supposedly the best intelligence organization in the Muslim world.

He had spent one year in Pakistan as part of his training and closely worked with the ISI, the CIA equivalent of Pakistan. In that stint, he had learned not only how terrorism worked across the globe but also how to spy on the country's own population.

The ISI used to train thousands of jihadists and send them across the border to India, but that was before 9/11. The truth was that after the ISI had bowed to American pressure, it reduced the number of terrorists it mass-trained and sent to India. But those terrorists were not going to stay home and read the *Quran* all day. They started blowing up bombs in Pakistan like people in America set off firecrackers on Fourth of July. The Pakistani terrorists, once disowned by the ISI, were partly funded by the Taliban and al-Qaeda, but the majority of the money came from Iran. The ISI had to keep a constant vigil on its people to see who received money from foreign sources.

His stint with the ISI later proved handy for Kassem because, as the intelligence chief, he needed to spy on his own people first.

As the chief, one of his main jobs was to collaborate with the CIA, to provide them with monthly reports and answer their never-ending queries. He took every email and fax from Langley seriously, as he knew how deep the CIA's pockets were and how long its hands were.

He knew about Halim. In fact, he had met Halim a few times. Deep inside his heart, he had respect for Halim, and he knew that Halim was not called the Lion of Dubai for nothing. When he received the fax from Langley, telling him that they needed to know Halim's whereabouts, it was no surprise to him. He had known this request would come sooner or later, so he had kept tabs on Halim. But the problem was that Halim had just

disappeared from Dubai a month before the CIA fax appeared on his machine.
After receiving the fax, Kassem asked for all the manifests for the last three months from all airlines that flew in and out of all sixteen airports in the United Arab Emirates. Bundles of paper with details of who flew when, to where, came flooding in. Kassem and a few trusted officers started going through the manifests meticulously, working day and night, looking for Halim's name or those of his five known aliases. Kassem's wife started complaining about his long hours and stopped only when he threatened to severely beat her, like he had done three years back.
He found nothing in the manifests under Halim's name. Kassem knew that didn't mean Halim had not left the country.

A LARGE BLACK windowless van rolled toward a secret jail located just twenty miles west of Dubai, far away from Al Tower, on Al Etihad Street in Dubai, where the police and intelligence headquarters were housed. The van approached the security gate, which was made of thick black-painted iron bars. The gate started opening, making just enough space for the vehicle to pass through. It looked like the guard was expecting the van.
The vehicle proceeded along the cobblestoned road and soon came to a halt. Five guards in olive-green dress shirts, with sticks in their hands and pistols in their holsters, approached the van. The driver alighted and walked to the back of the vehicle and opened the door. Inside, eight men were sitting with their hands cuffed and legs shackled. All of them wore orange jumpsuits. The guards escorted them inside the jail and guided them to their cells. These were the men picked up by Kassem earlier in the day. He knew asking those bastards about Halim's whereabouts was like asking al-Qaeda where they would explode the next bomb.
Kassem's order was strict – no food or water to those men for two days, just to soften them up.

AFTER THOSE TWO days had passed, Kassem appeared in the jail with four strong-looking assistant policemen. They visited all eight cells, one by one, and broke the right thumbs of all the men without asking a single question.

Later in the day, Kassem and his men reappeared in front of the first of those cells. The accompanying jailor inserted the key in the lock and gave it a turn. Kassem grabbed the iron bar of the gate, pulling it open. He made eye contact with the jailor and jerked his head, indicating that the jailor should leave now, and the man immediately obliged.

Kassem entered the cell. It was barely eight by ten feet, with a bed covered with a threadbare cotton sheet. The temperature was much cooler than outside. If the walls of the cell had ever been painted, it must have been decades back. The jailed man was about five feet six inches tall, had gray hair, and a round pot belly. The man stood up from his bed as soon as he saw Kassem enter.

Kassem stood in front of the jailed man and gave him a piercing look. Kassem did not move his eyes for a few seconds, and the imprisoned man took a few steps backward until his back was against the wall, his face ashen.

“How is your thumb?” Kassem asked. It sounded more like a joke.

“Okay,” said the abashed man, his voice hardly audible.

Kassem took two steps forward and asked angrily, “Are you a man or woman? I asked how your thumb is.”

“Okay,” repeated the man, this time a little louder, and he pressed his back against the wall.

“Let me see your thumb,” Kassem said. His four assistants moved closer, and now the five men were standing barely three feet away from the fearful man, who raised his hand. The thumb was swollen and red.

One of Kassem’s assistants grabbed it and gave it a turn.

“Ah…ah,” the man bellowed and writhed in pain. The echo of his cry could be heard. The assistant let the finger go. The jailed man bent a little and covered his painful thumb protectively with the other hand.

Kassem grabbed the man by his hair and straightened him up, “Now, tell me where Halim is, or we are going to break your remaining nine fingers, cut off your penis and feed it to eagles in the desert.” Kassem moved his head closer. “What’s it going to be?”

The man started crying like a baby and said, “I don’t know where Halim is. I haven’t seen him in a while…I am innocent.”

Kassem’s long experience with people told him that the man was truthful. But he gave instruction to his assistants to break the man’s other thumb anyway, which made him feel like he was the most powerful man on Earth.

Kassem walked through the hallway, moving on to the next cell. He heard the shrill cries coming from the first cell – the captive man's second thumb had been broken.
Kassem and the three strong men entered the cell of the second prisoner. This fellow was a hulking muscleman, certainly over six feet, and weighed more than ninety kilos. He stood up as Kassem entered the cell, and the man held his ground and made eye contact with Kassem.
It was a dimly lit, damp room. A metal bed lay by the wall; the stench from the toilet at the corner was enough to make any normal person retch. But neither Kassem nor the other men were ordinary people. They stood in front of the jailed man with heads high and arms akimbo.
The two assistants moved close to the prisoner, grabbed his shoulders and hoisted him up in the air. Kassem stepped in front, grabbed the man's balls and squeezed them as hard as he could. The prisoner screamed like an animal about to be slaughtered. When he threw kicks and one of the kicks fell on Kassem's pot belly, Kassem held the prisoner's one leg with one hand, and with the other he twisted the prisoner's balls, as if trying to pluck them out.
The assistants dropped the man on the concrete floor and kicked him in his chest. The man tried to crawl away, but his head hit the bed. He curled up, writhing in pain.
Kassem took his gun from his leather holster and pointed it at the prisoner's head, "Now, tell me where your boss, Halim, is." He tapped the mouth of the barrel against the man's head.
"I don't know," replied the man. One of the assistants kicked him again.
"Maybe this will help," said Kassem and forced the barrel of his gun into the prisoner's mouth. The cracking sound of the metal clashing through teeth could be heard as the prisoner tried to soften the blow by tilting his head backward.
Kassem took a step back. Blood started coming out of the tortured man's mouth. Kassem jerked his head, a signal to kick him again. One of the assistants obliged; the man grunted and spat blood and a tooth on the concrete floor.
Kassem put his right foot on the man's chest, pinning him to the ground. He pointed his gun to the man's head and said, "For the last time. Do you want to tell me where Halim is, or do you want to die here?"
The man nodded, and Kassem waited to hear.

“Halim is in Somalia,” the prisoner said in a broken voice.

AFTER KASSEM WAS done with the second prisoner, he moved to the third cell. The prisoner lay on the bed, and at the noise of the door opening, he stood up. He wore a jumpsuit that covered him up to his neck. He had unkempt hair and black marks below his eyes. The prisoner rested his right hand at his hip; it perhaps mitigated the pain from his broken, swollen thumb.

Kassem stood in front of him with a demeanor that told the prisoner that he was in a lot of trouble. His assistants moved in, and one assistant kicked the base of the bed, shifting it by inches. The jailed man shivered and moved back two feet.

Kassem took two steps forward and was almost breathing on the nose of the poor man.

“Strip,” commanded Kassem.

“I beg your pardon?” the prisoner asked meekly. He clasped his hands together at his belly.

“I said strip,” shouted Kassem, one of his assistants stepping closer to the prisoner, standing barely a foot away from the man being asked to strip.

In response, the prisoner bent slightly, putting his two palms at his groin, as if trying to protect his manhood.

One assistant grabbed the hapless prisoner by his hand, pulling him closer. The other assistant caught the prisoner’s other arm, near his shoulder. The jailed man now had both his hands immobilized. The third assistant policeman moved forward, grabbed the man’s clothes and, with one jerk, ripped the garment. Kassem stood and watched as the policemen tear the clothes completely off the prisoner with a second jerk, leaving the man stark naked.

“Now,” Kassem said to his assistant, who walked out of the cell and reappeared with a hosepipe. The other assistants and Kassem moved away from the prisoner, thus leaving the ill-fated naked man near the wall.

“Go,” said Kassem, and a water jet fell on the prisoner at bullet speed, throwing him against the wall. The prisoner fell down and attempted to stand up, but the water jet was pointed at his feet, and he fell back on the floor every time he tried to get up. The force of the water was too much; it was pointed at his head, and then back to his feet, and then back to his head.

His head repeatedly hit the wall, and blood soon started oozing from the back of his skull. The water onslaught continued for twenty minutes, and then it stopped after Kassem raised his hand.

The prisoner stood up, naked; distress showed on his body, which was now covered with blood.

“Now, are you going to tell me where Halim is?” asked Kassem, grinding his teeth.

“I don’t know,” said the naked man.

Kassem slapped him in the face and then grabbed him by the hair and banged his head against the wall.

The naked man grunted, more blood dripping down his neck, and the blood turned pink upon its mixing with the water on his chest. One of the assistants kicked his knee and threw a punch into his stomach.

“How about now?” Kassem asked, rolling his eyes. “Where is Halim?”

“He is in Kandahar, Afghanistan.”

Kassem grimaced, bit his lower lip, and then threw a jab into the man’s stomach and walked out of the cell.

Kassem went back to the office of Mahmood, who was the chief administrator of the secret jail. The air was hot in there; Kassem wiped the sweat from his brow as he sat on the metal chair. His four assistants stood behind him.

“Is your work done?” Mahmood asked with a chuckle.

Kassem shook his head and rearranged his legs. “These bastards are tough. They don’t tell the truth easily.”

“Do you want some cold Coke?” the jailor asked.

“No. Just some tea, please.”

“Hey, six teas, strong,” Mahmood shouted to an invisible person, and within five minutes, tea cups appeared on a large plate carried by a short man.

Kassem sipped his tea and felt relaxed. “These fellows are hard to crack,” he said to Mahmood, putting the teacup down on the wooden table.

“Some guys are tough,” Mahmood said. “Especially the ones that come from Afghanistan.”

Kassem felt insulted and said, “Nobody is from Afghanistan. These fellows are all local.” Then he calmed a little. “What would you suggest to make them talk?”

“Try electricity. That never fails.”

“Show me where you keep your wires,” said Kassem and rose from his chair.

A HALF HOUR later Kassem and two of his helper policemen appeared in the cell of the next prisoner. The policemen had wires that were attached to a heavy car battery at one end and a metal stick with an insulated handle on the other end. The prisoner was sound asleep on the metal bed. Kassem opened the cell door. But the loud, creaking metallic noise of the door opening was not enough to wake him up.

One of Kassem’s men flipped a switch on the car battery, making the metal stick in Kassem’s hand live. To test it, Kassem rubbed the stick on the iron bars of the door, and bright sparks emitted from the point of contact.

The jailed man was still asleep, and Kassem thought it would be nice to wake him up with a dose of electricity. Kassem moved closer to the bed, careful not to touch the metal frame, and looked at the man’s face. His face was much darker than the rest of his body. It had multiple dents on it, which perhaps came from chicken pox. Kassem moved close to the prisoner’s foot and lowered the metal stick as his assistants watched. He touched the bottom of the star-crossed man’s foot with the metal rod and held it for two seconds.

The man’s body shivered at first, and then it curled, just like a worm does when it is sliced into two pieces. The man groaned in pain, his body uncurling and curling up again.

Kassem stood in front of the man, grinning. “Are you going to tell me where Halim is, or do you want to be licked by this?” Kassem swung the metal rod in the air.

“I have no idea where he is,” the man said in a fearful tone.

“No?” shouted Kassem. He lowered the rod, and it touched the ill-fated man’s belly.

The man shrieked in pain and jerked his arms and legs. “Okay, okay. I will tell you,” the man said.

“Where?” Kassem took a step forward and lowered his face and shouted, “Where is Halim?”

The jailed man gasped for air and said, “Halim is in Switzerland.”

Kassem flinched. He swung the metal rod in his hand one more time, bit his lower lip, and threw the prisoner a piercing look.

Three prisoners had given him three different locations. Kassem was now sure none of them were correct. Halim was not in any of those three places. He felt all his work was just a waste, and his day had been in vain.
Out of frustration, he swayed the metal rod again, this time hitting the prisoner’s head.
The question that remained in his mind was whether the men were just telling random lies or if it was a coordinated lie. He was determined to find out.

CHAPTER 16

“Do you want to fly to Dubai this week or next week?” It was Lazarus on the phone.

“This week,” said Doerr. “Actually, I can fly tonight, if you can arrange the ticket.”

“I think we should be able to do that.”

“Thanks, Lazarus. Any idea about where Samuel is now?”

“I have no new information. If I find something, I will let you know.”

“After I finish this Dubai job,” Doerr said, “you will let me pursue Samuel. Right? You won’t take back your word?”

“You have my word, Max. After this Dubai job is finished and we get Halim, you can go after Samuel. You will have access to the CIA database and our full support.” Lazarus’s tone turned menacing. “But I warn you – don’t try to go after Samuel on your own before the Dubai job is complete. We don’t like freelancers. You have to do what the agency tells you to do.”

Doerr thought for a second. The only chance he had to find Samuel was through the CIA. If he blew this, he would be blowing his only chance of ever catching Samuel. “Okay, boss.” Doerr hung up.

DOERR FLEW OUT the same night. The plane touched down in Dubai International Airport at four p.m. local time. After going through immigration and customs, Doerr exited the terminal with two suitcases. Hot air hit his face, and he liked it. He wished to retire in Florida someday and had talked to Gayle about it, but she thought it was too early to muse about retirement.

Doerr took a cab to the Dusit Thani Hotel. ‘It was not overly expensive and gave value for the buck,’ according to the Langley rep who had given him the details of his booking. Once he got into his room, he realized that the rep was not wrong. The room was well maintained, the toilet was clean, and the view from the room was marvelous.

It was already seven p.m., and Doerr wanted to have his dinner before the restaurant closed. He hated to call room service and dine alone in his room. He went down to the restaurant and ordered two pieces of shish kabob and a plate of goat biryani. The restaurant was nearly empty, but he was rewarded with a grand view of downtown Dubai through the glass windows. The Burj

Khalifa, the tallest building in the world, stood out like a defiant teenager. He knew the six-hundred-meter-tall building was a statement from the Emirates and was built at a cost of one and a half billion dollars.

After dinner, he tipped the waiter generously. Once back in his room, he set the alarm to 6:30 a.m. and went to bed.

The next morning, Doerr woke up to the noise of the alarm and spent an hour reading the dossier he had been given on Kassem, the UAE intelligence chief. Kassem was loved by the Langley bosses and liked by the current administration in the White House. His ability to squeeze information out of captured terrorists and criminals was revered throughout the Middle East.

Doerr shaved, took a shower, and then went downstairs to hail a cab to Kassem's office. The ride was pleasant; the morning air was cool and dust free. The cabbie dropped him at the office. He paid with local dirham. He got out and ran his fingers through his blond hair left unkempt by the unruly dry air. He loosened the knot of his red tie before proceeding toward the collapsible gate of the large building.

He took the elevator to Kassem's office on the seventh floor. The male receptionist asked him to wait, and he sat down on the metal chair. From the waiting area he could see the employees inside – they were sitting close to each other at small tables, each shared by two employees. The working conditions were inferior to most offices in America, but he had seen worse.

Doerr glanced at his watch. His wait for Kassem had already exceeded a half hour. The chief, he was told, was mindful of time. Doerr was about to inquire with the receptionist, but he noticed a man with a thick mustache, which gave him an aura of seriousness, approaching. Doerr knew it was Kassem.

After exchanging greetings and introductions, Kassem showed him the way to his office. Kassem was not a man who spoke too many words; Doerr knew that from the dossier.

"We roughed up eight guys," Kassem said as he walked down the hallway and described the men he had in custody. "Three men gave three different stories," Kassem continued and entered his room. The room was ten by fourteen feet, Doerr estimated. Kassem's own chair was wooden and had intricate designs woven into it. The three guest chairs were made of metal rods, and paint had flaked away from many spots. "And we are checking

the other men out. We are leaving no stone unturned." Kassem gave a big smile and pointed to the guest chairs.
Doerr sat down; the metal rods creaked, but the room air was cool and comfortable. The rattling noise of the air cooler could be heard. "You found out anything useful yet?" Doerr asked.
"Not yet, but I am hoping we will know where that *bastard* Halim is, pretty soon. We will beat the hell out of those guys we have in custody, and one of them will have to be correct."
"Hope does not get anything done, Chief. Do you have any sources other than those eight men?"
Kassem looked down. Doerr's words hurt his pride. "We are pursuing all sources," Kassem said. "I am sure we will find Halim soon and bust his balls."
"Uh-huh." Doerr knew that sometimes the local authorities would know where the man sought by the CIA was, but they wouldn't give out that information – sort of playing a double agent role.
But that is not the case here, Doerr thought. "Can I talk to those eight guys?"
"Sure. Be my guest." Kassem's expression returned to one of cheer. "I will be glad to send them to Gitmo. Although I don't think some of the buggers can withstand the long air journey."
Doerr knew why the prisoners could not withstand a long travel. Torture was a common method of extracting information in nearly all Asian countries.
"Talk to them here in Dubai first. Then they can head for Gitmo," Kassem said. "You can apply a little bit of water-boarding that your good Vice President Cheney invented. Maybe then those bastards will talk."
"Dick Cheney didn't invent water-boarding, and we are not allowed to use it on anyone anymore. When can I see those prisoners?"
"Anytime. I can take you there right now, if you want."
"Okay, let's go, then. But I will interrogate them alone."
"No problem," said Kassem and rose from his chair. "Be my guest."

THE CIA HAD many techniques for asking questions. Some in the agency believed in torture, but Doerr knew that torture only worked under certain circumstances; what worked even more was morality, fear of God's wrath,

money, and the ace of all – the lure of a Green Card. Doerr had used it so often that he could not even remember how many times. He remembered Evanovich, the Romanian man who had refused half a million dollars from the CIA, to infiltrate the KGB. Evanovich used to import drugs from Afghanistan into his own country and exported young girls from Romania to rich Russian tycoons. After he was given a promise of a Green Card, only then he changed his mind. The lure of a peaceful life with no enemy lurking behind with a 9mm or Makarov pistol was too good to refuse for men like Evanovich.

Doerr was sure that the Green Card route would be the best incentive for the men incarcerated by Kassem. He talked to the first three men, interrogating them alone.

FAIZAN WAS BARELY twenty-two years old, but his thick beard hid his youth. He was a brilliant student, just graduated from Cairo University with distinction. He applied at a number of American Universities for an entry to the MS program, not because he loved America, but because he knew that a degree from an American university would put him on Egypt's corporate ladder; he hated the Zionist America. He had been overjoyed when he received his acceptance letter, not just from one American University but three of them, including Georgetown University. He had started planning where he would go, how he would fund his education, and even thought of staying in America after completing his education. But all that was in vain, as he received a rejection notice from the American Embassy in Cairo. His student visa application had been rejected. After that his hate for the American infidels increased, and he was soon introduced to Halim, the Lion of Dubai.

Halim flew to Cairo to meet the young man in person. He was not disappointed by what he saw. The timing was perfect. Halim was looking for a young, able, and educated man to carry out his operation. Faizan fit his need. He had just the right amount of hatred for America and passion for taking revenge.

Faizan needed some training, which was completed by sending him to Somalia promptly for a month-long crash course at an al-Qaeda training center.

HALIM WAS THE man the big corporations in the city of Dubai often called upon to settle disputes over their share of the oil and other resources. He traveled extensively with his business partners to Dubai, Riyadh, Amman, Tehran and New Delhi, to name a few. He partied with many, but being a devout Muslim, he never touched alcohol. He even rejected the idea of drinking soda from a bottle that resembled a beer bottle.

Halim didn't just do business with oil. He diversified into many areas, including drugs. He had invested in drug smuggling from Afghanistan and Mexico to Europe, making good connections with the Mexican cartels in the process.

He had made a lot of money, but he was a man who didn't do it for himself. He gave away most of his money to men who practiced the twenty-five rules to be close to Allah. The recipients included many mosques and mullahs in Pakistan, Indonesia, Malaysia and other countries. He was the intermediary for the money that had flowed from Saudi Arabia to al-Qaeda, and he contributed plenty of his own cash.

He delegated the business work to his brothers and took on more hands-on work with his terrorist brothers. He went to Somalia and received training in marksmanship and bomb making. He visited the mountains that bordered Afghanistan and Pakistan, considered the headquarters of terrorism.

After Osama Bin Laden was killed in 2010, Halim was in a total rage and was desperate to do something at the heart of America – Washington, DC. He thought Faizan would be the right person to execute his plan. The young man was bent on revenge and ready to do anything to bring Zionist America down.

Faizan had only one condition – he had to have a safe getaway.

Halim did not consider that to be a problem. He knew a handful of mullahs in the city, each of them more than capable of changing a young mind like Faizan's.

AHMAD, HALIM, AND Faizan sat at a round table in a fourth-floor room in Al Shariba, a four-star hotel in Dubai, located about a mile from the office where Doerr and Kassem had met earlier. Ahmad, the wise, old, petulant man in his late fifties, never forgot to wear a clean white net cap, and today was no exception. Ahmad was a sort of advisor to Halim. Halim

sat there, with his eyes slightly lowered, and took a curt glance at Faizan, the new young man from Egypt, who exuded confidence from his freshly finished training in Somalia.
Faizan looked very angry and said, “I am ready to attack the consulate in Cairo. Give me permission, Halim. How dare they reject my visa? I have never been rejected for anything, by anyone, in my life.”
Halim tried to calm him down. “How many Americans do you think work there?”
“Ten, fifteen. I don’t know.”
“Ten. And how many Muslim brothers work there?”
Faizan caressed his beard and said, “How many? Twenty? Thirty?”
“Fifty-six,” Halim said with a grin. “Now you realize why we shouldn’t bomb the embassy there?”
Faizan nodded. “I see your point. The death of ten Americans does not justify killing fifty-six of our own.” Faizan stood up and clenched his fists. “But I feel very angry and want to choke those ten Americans.”
“We have to think with our heads.” Ahmad, the elderly man, spoke for the first time. “And act with our hands. Planning is the key.”
“Cool down, Faizan,” the short and stocky Halim stood up and said. “Look at this man. His name is Ahmad. His son was killed by the Saudi Police. But he did not take up arms. He came to me.” Halim patted Ahmad’s shoulder, Ahmad nodded, and Halim looked at Faizan and continued. “By coming to me, you have taken the right step, son. If you go and attack the Cairo consulate, the Egyptian guards will shoot you and perhaps kill you, too. And those evil Americans will drink more wine and laugh at us.”
Halim paused; the other two men wore grim expressions on their faces.
Faizan finally said, “What do you say we do?”
“The right way to hit them will be to strike them in their own country.”
Halim went back to his chair and sat down.
“But how is he going to get there?” Ahmad asked, pointing his hand at Faizan. “His student visa was just rejected. Now he won’t even get a tourist visa.”
“I have already made plans as to how he can get there. I have some contacts with the Mexican cartels. They have assured me they can take Faizan across the border and drop him with a friend of mine in Augusta, Georgia. My friend is well settled there.” Halim turned to Faizan. “He will help you for a few days, but he won’t know your real purpose of visiting. He will think

you are visiting the university for a project. After that, you will head for Washington, the center of all evildoers. But you will be alone, all by yourself. You will have some help from a man who goes by the name Sigma. I hear he is a CIA turncoat. But his help will be very limited. Most of the work you will have to do yourself. You think you can do it?"

Faizan pounded his fist on the center of the table, and the table vibrated. He rose and said, "Yes, I am ready to carry out Allah's wish."

"Very good, son. Now sit down and listen." Halim opened a manila folder and took out a few pieces of paper. He gave some to Ahmad and some to Faizan. "Faizan, you will be headed for Mexico City in two days. Now, let's talk about the details of everything that will happen."

CHAPTER 17

Regina Rosania had been approached by the CIA after she had finished her incarceration in Italy for killing her stepfather, who had abused her both mentally and physically. She'd had a dream of becoming a model in Paris, but that had never become a reality. Her spy work had kept her busy twenty-four seven, and at Langley the beautiful twenty-nine-year-old woman had been recognized as the best foreign-born operative.

"Your next target will be Raafiq," said Andy, Rosania's boss, who had recruited her seven years back. "He is the brother of Abu Halim. Raafiq controls his family business from Paris. He raises money for terrorists. And one of the ways he raises money is by trading stolen paintings."

"But didn't you just say he has a big business?" Rosania cast a frown, swinging the leather chair in the safe house in Montreuil, located a few kilometers from Paris. "Why would he need to trade paintings to make money?"

"Okay, Raafiq is one weird man." Andy lit a cigarette and offered one to Rosania. "He had a childhood ambition of becoming a painter. He moved to Paris years back, against his family's wishes, hoping to become a famous painter. But his dream never came true. Then he moved into buying paintings, and soon he started buying and selling stolen paintings."

"Interesting." Rosania took a deep drag from her cigarette. "So I have to get rid of him?"

"Yes, but 'get rid of him' in this case doesn't mean we have to kill the man. We have to find something bad, like drugs or stolen paintings, in his apartment and leak the info to the police. They should take care of the rest."

"So how much time do I have to *get rid of him*?" Rosania asked as she rubbed the butt of her cigarette in the glass ashtray.

"That's the other thing," Andy said, looking straight into her eyes. "We have to take care of this Raafiq business in just a couple of days."

"Are you kidding me?" Rosania sat up straight in her chair. "A couple of days?"

"I know, I know." Andy stood up, took a few steps toward the small window and then turned back to face Regina. "The thing is, CIA is closing in on Abu Halim. They want to take Raafiq off the street. As soon as Raafiq is taken care of, Director Stonewall wants you to head for Dubai. One of our best guys is already there, leading an effort to capture or kill Halim."

Rosania stood up and faced Andy. “Work to me is religion. I always do my best. But I don’t want to promise something that I may not be able to deliver. I can go to Dubai today if you want, but I may not be able to take care of Raafiq in just a few days. But I will try.”
“I have full confidence in you,” Andy said. “I myself will drive you around, and I will be available in case you need something from me. Stonewall wants Halim and his brother to be taken care of as soon as possible. She says the president is asking for daily updates on this.”

ANDY DROPPED ROSANIA at the bar in downtown Paris that Raafiq frequented. She walked inside the bar, wearing a black leather miniskirt and a skin-tight top. Once inside and seated, she took slow sips from a bottle of Carlsberg beer, her eyes scanning each person in the bar. It was eight p.m. The bar was not full yet; there were about thirty or forty customers who were drinking alcohol and watching the soccer game being shown on the large TV. As a player scored a goal and the customers roared in joy, her sharp eyes spotted Raafiq, who was sitting at a table in the corner all by himself, drinking red wine. The man was clean shaven, his hair curly, and he looked more like a white man than an Asian. His chin was long compared to the size of his head, and he had a prominent Adam’s apple that could be spotted from miles away.
Rosania threw him looks while sipping from her bottle. Raafiq noticed her. He grabbed his wine glass, walked over to her table, and introduced himself. “Hi, I’m Raafiq.”
She looked at him, took the last sip of her beer, and placed the empty beer bottle at the center of the small wooden table. “I’m Rosania.” She made a face that told Raafiq that she was not too excited that he had come to her table, but for now she was going to tolerate him. She watched Raafiq take a seat.
Raafiq waved to a bartender, and the bartender came immediately. “My lady needs a drink.”
Raafiq turned to Rosania and asked. “What would you like to have tonight?”
“I would like to have a lot of things,” Rosania said, cocking her head. “But for now I need a glass of red Bordeaux.”

Raafiq nodded to the bartender, who left and came back within a minute with a glass of red wine and placed it on the table. Raafiq paid the tab with a ten-euro note.
“What else do you want?” Raafiq turned to Rosania.
“Tell me who you are.” Rosania thought she already knew too much about him. But this was a game that she had to play. “What do you do? Where are you from?”
“But before that, why don’t you say something about yourself first?” Raafiq lifted his glass to his mouth and took a quick glance at the TV, which pretty much everyone else in the bar was looking at as they were showing a critical soccer league game.
“Okay,” she said. “I wanted to be a model in Paris, but it’s so hard to break through.” That was not far from the truth. “It’s like all the good-looking girls of the world are here already. And I’m ready to give up unless I get a break.”
Raafiq eyed her like a hyena looking at a dead deer. “I can give you a chance. I’m a painter.”
Rosania straightened her face and tried her best to look surprised and hopeful at the same time. “Are you? Will you make me a model?” She knew he was a fake painter and was lying, but then she was too. She put on a bright smile.
“Of course I will. But before that,” Raafiq got off his chair and pulled it up close to her, “tell me more about yourself. Where are you from?”
“I’m from Italy. I grew up in Rome. My parents wanted me to be a doctor, but instead I went to the University of Rome to study the arts.” Even she was surprised by how easy it was to tell those lies. Earlier during the day, she had rehearsed all that. “I studied literature and poetry. After finishing my course, I wanted to be a model. I did some photo shoots in Rome but wasn’t paid much. Then I thought why not go to *the* place – Paris. Don’t you think I’m bold?”
“You are. Who said you aren’t?” Raafiq nodded. “And you are beautiful, too. How did you come to Paris? Did someone help you out?”
“Yes, my uncle Andy.” She gave him the name of her mentor at the CIA. “He helped me out. I’m actually living at his place till I make some good money and get a place of my own.”
“What does your uncle do?” Raafiq asked.

“He’s a magazine reviewer. Wait – I’m not really sure. He might have switched his line of work. Now it’s your turn,” Rosania said. “Tell me where you are from and how did you get here.”
Raafiq spoke for the next few minutes. Rosania knew that most of what he said was untrue. He said he had been born in France, but she knew he had actually been born in Dubai. He said he graduated from Paris Dauphine University, and although she knew he had a college degree, it was from Alfaisal University in Riyadh. He said he was a student of Corinne Tounsi, the painter. Rosania knew that was not true, either.
“I paint,” Raafiq said. “And I could use some help.”
“You paint what? I mean water or oil?”
“Oil mostly. Van Gogh is my favorite, but I want to paint like Picasso.”
“Why is that?”
“Because I think Picasso brought out the best in humans, especially the women. My paintings will be much better if I could use a model like you.”
“Why can’t you get one? After all, this is Paris, and you seem to have plenty of cash.” She waited for an answer.
“I don’t know.” Raafiq looked at the door. More drinkers were coming in. The bar was getting crowded. “I could never find a girl I like. Maybe it’s a curse.”
She knew it was all a lie, too. According to the dossier on Raafiq, he changed girls every other month, if not every other week, and he didn’t use them just as models. Rosania posed an innocent face and said, “Maybe I’m not as good as you think.”
“I’m sure you are good.” He rested his left palm on her shoulder and stroked her cheek once. “Why don’t we go to my flat and find out. It’s right around the corner from here.”
She knew even that was a lie. Raafiq’s flat was at least a kilometer away.
“Are we still talking about painting and modeling or something else? It’s close to midnight.” She pointed to her watch.
“Of course I’m talking about painting.” He bit his lower lip and chuckled. “Artists are timeless. I can speak about painting the whole night. In fact, we can go to your place if you want.”
“My place won’t do. My uncle does not like strangers, let alone handsome young men like you.”
He smiled, obviously delighted by the flattery. “That’s a problem.” He had his eyes fixed on hers. “What do we do now?”

“Nothing,” she said and rose from her chair. She extended her hand for a shake. “I should be going. My uncle must be getting anxious. Why don’t we meet tomorrow, right here, at ten?”

Raafiq took her hand and held it between his hands. “All right. See you tomorrow.”

Rosania proceeded to the door. A few drunken heads turned to watch her walk away; she was used to that, and she advanced without looking back. She knew Raafiq’s gaze was attached to her rear end.

She walked through the door into the semi-darkness, and a blast of chilly air hit her in the face. She took her cell phone out from her purse and then dialed a preprogrammed number and whispered, “I’m out.”

She continued to trudge along the damp concrete sidewalk. She could see a man walking two or three hundred feet away. His gait told her that the man had more than enough to drink and was headed back to his wife or a whore. France occupied one of the top spots on the per capita alcohol consumption list, way above Italy or America, and just a shade below the king – Russia.

At the next junction, Rosania turned right. A black-tinted sedan was waiting. As she neared, the driver turned the ignition on. Rosania got in and immediately lit a cigarette.

“How did it go?” Andy, the driver, asked. The car started moving slowly.

“Okay.” She released clouds of tar smoke. “I like to paint like Picasso,” she said mockingly. “Picasso, my ass.” She jerked the cigarette butt, and the ash fell in the tiny ashtray. “Raafiq is a loser.”

AFTER ROSANIA LEFT, Raafiq stood up and walked to the empty table at the center and ordered a large glass of wine. He looked around for a single woman and located one, a blonde who looked to be in her mid-thirties. He stood up from his chair, heading for that woman’s table. As he took his first step, a man appeared at her side and sat next to her. The man was over six feet tall, and his bicep muscles were the size of tree trunks.

Raafiq sank back into his chair and ordered a double shot of Chivas Regal whisky. The bartender brought his liquor. Before he could enjoy the drink, he received a phone call.

“She is a mole,” the voice at the other end said.

“Who? The girl sitting in front of me?”

“No, the woman who you talked to for hours.”

"Oh, that girl. She will be a good fuck."
"It will be a good fuck for her. She will fuck you. Now get the hell out."
"Come on, man, she is just a woman. What can she do to me?"
"Don't take her so lightly," the voice said. "There are rumors that she is directly working for the CIA. The CIA – the silent killer."
"Don't be so afraid. When she comes to my flat, I will be awake and watching her hands. I can take care of her."
"Listen, boss, we will be close by, and I will also give you a pistol for you to carry."
"Okay," said Raafiq, sighing. "But all that is not really necessary."

THE FOLLOWING DAY, Andy dropped Rosania at the same bar. It was a few minutes to ten p.m.; people were coming in to get drunk, the bouncers looking busier than the day before. The bartenders were frantically taking orders and delivering drinks to their customers. It was a Friday, and the whole of Paris seemed to be warming to a drunken weekend.
Rosania slowly walked to the center of the bar and found Raafiq there. The son-of-a-bitch was settled with his glass of red wine. She wished the man would vanish or simply drop dead.
But neither of those things happened, and Raafiq smiled when he saw Rosania approaching. She had to face him. She showed him an index finger, indicating she would be back soon, and headed for the bathroom.
She straightened her clothes, put on a fresh layer of lipstick, and gathered up enough strength to face Raafiq.
"How long have you been waiting?" She forced out a smile.
"I came here at eight." He lifted the glass to his lips and took a small sip. He waved to the bartender, who came promptly and took her order.
"How come you were so early?" Rosania asked.
"I was hoping you would be too." He smiled and sat up. "And we could spend more time getting to know each other."
Rosania had to give it to him, he was charming.
"How is your uncle?" Raafiq asked.
"What?"
"Your uncle. How is he?"
"Oh." Rosania was caught off guard. "He's fine."
The bartender brought her wine.

“Uh-huh,” he said and threw a piercing look at her. She wondered how much he knew about her. She was told Raafiq was being followed and his calls monitored, and she would be informed anytime something significant happened. But just months before, her trainer had said, “When you are on a job, be alert and never relax. You have only one protector – yourself.”

She knew that she was dealing with a dangerous man, and her life was in danger every minute she spent with him.

In the bar, an hour passed by easily. She was working on her second glass of wine, and Raafiq had downed two glasses of Chardonnay and a shot of whisky. His eyes were red from drinking and smoking.

“I have paintings worth five million bucks in my flat,” Raafiq said in a drunken voice.

Her eyes popped. “You must have a lot of money. Where do you keep it? I mean, which bank?” She instantly knew that was a bad question to ask. It was not a piece of information he was likely to give up easily. Finding the terrorist money trail was one of the top goals for the agency.

Raafiq moved his fingers, asking her to come closer, and she complied. She leaned forward and turned her face to put her ear close to his mouth, and then it happened. Her glass toppled, and her leather skirt got wet. Instinctively she stood up.

“I’m so sorry,” he said and stood up.

She looked at her ruined clothes and rushed to the bathroom. As soon as she reached the bathroom door, she realized she had left her purse on the table. She ran back and was relieved to see the leather bag undisturbed. She glanced at Raafiq, looking for a hint as to whether he had searched her purse. But the man’s face was emotionless like a stone.

She took her purse and headed back to the bathroom. She cleaned up the wine as much as she could. But it was hard to return the wet leather to its shine.

Fuck, if you don’t want to tell me the bank name, just say so. God! Don’t fucking ruin my expensive leather skirt.

She opened her leather purse. There was no sign of invasion. Under the real lipstick case, the fake one with a built-in camera lay there. A Swiss knife and pepper spray lay under carefully placed receipts. She opened the first chamber. Inside there was a needle, a syringe, a plunger, and a small pouch with the crushed tranquilizer.

She had practiced twice that morning how to put ten milliliters of the liquid and the powder into the syringe, and then plunge it into a pillow – all with just one hand.
She closed her purse and walked back to her table.
Raafiq apologized again and asked her if she would like to visit his flat.
She thought for a moment. She wanted to finish the work as well. “Okay, let’s go,” she said.

RAAFIQ ROSE, AND she followed him from the bar. They came out of the building together and stood on the cobblestoned curbside. Traffic was almost nonexistent. She checked her watch – it was twenty minutes past midnight.
A yellow cab came from nowhere and screeched to a halt at Raafiq’s feet. Without saying anything, Raafiq opened the rear door and got in. As he entered the cab, his white T-shirt moved up a few inches, and she saw it. The pistol was tucked into the waistband of his jeans. She felt a shiver up her legs, the legs that were already moving inside the cab. *You are your only protector.*
The cab took barely five minutes to reach his flat. Raafiq threw a few euros at the young cabbie.
The building was seven or eight stories high. The next building was taller, maybe twenty stories.
Raafiq opened the iron-gate and held it open for Rosania. Her scarf ruffled in the air, and the late night chill brought shivers back to her body.
Thoughts of death crossed her mind. She now regretted not bringing her Sig Sauer P228, a gun perfect for hiding in a purse. But she could not turn back now.
Raafiq skipped the elevator and headed for the stairs. While climbing, he lit another cigarette.
As he walked up, she followed and tried to spot his gun. It was hidden by his shirt, but now that she knew it was there, she could still see the outline through his clothes.
They ascended two flights of stairs to his door, right next to the stairwell.
Inside the living room, there were four painting stands, one in front of the kitchen, one next to the sofa, and two more in the corners of the living room.

“Settle down.” He smiled, pointed to the sofa and went inside. He came back two minutes later wearing shorts and a blue sleeveless T-shirt.
“Wine?” he asked.
“No, I’m fine.” She was feeling tired, and more than that, she was tense. She felt just a tad relaxed as the gun certainly wasn’t with him anymore. “I had too much to drink already.”
Raafiq came back with a large glass of wine and a cigarette blazing between his lips. The man would certainly die from lung cancer or a failing liver, she was sure, if his enemies didn’t kill him sooner.
“Where are the five million dollars’ worth of paintings?” she asked.
“I will show you. Let me finish my drink first.” Raafiq sat close to her. Raafiq stroked her shoulders a few times. She just sat there, watching every corner of the living area, taking in mental images. In one corner, a bunch of paintbrushes lay strewn. In another, there were four small bottles of oil paints.
After taking the last sip of his wine, he pointed to the bedroom and said, “Come inside.”
Rosania rose, the man must have hung the expensive paintings inside the bedroom. It was one a.m. already, but she wanted to finish the job and not have to come back another day.
She entered the bedroom. The walls were covered with paintings, hardly any empty space left visible on the wall. Some looked classy, some cheap. He sat on the bed. “Why don’t you sit here?” He pointed to the space next to him.
Rosania sat down and asked, “All these paintings are worth five million in total?” She knew trading stolen paintings was another trade Raafiq was engaged in.
“More than that. But most are worth nothing. Look at this one.” Raafiq rose and pointed to a portrait of a woman standing next to a tree. “This is worth more than six hundred thousand euros. It was originally painted by a famous Dutch painter and has changed hands many times before falling into mine.”
“Wasn’t that reported stolen?”
Raafiq nodded and smiled at the same time. “And look at this one.” He pointed to another oil painting, where a man was kissing a woman and a child looked on. “I got it for a quarter of a million, but it will easily sell for a half mil now.”

“Do you consider yourself more of an art dealer than a painter?” Rosania asked. *A thief is really a more appropriate word to describe you*.
“I am both.” Raafiq came within inches of her and brushed her cheek with his fingers. “But painting is what I love. My work never reached the exhibitions. But that might change, if you become my model.”
Rosania felt uncomfortable with the way he said ‘my model.’ It sounded more like ‘my whore.’ She said nothing, looked at the floor, and swung her legs back and forth.
“Will you become my model?” Raafiq put his arms around her, pressed his body against her chest and kissed her on the cheek.
“Yes,” she said.
Raafiq continued kissing her. He moved to her forehead, neck, cheek and then her lips. As Raafiq pressed his lips against hers, a feeling of revulsion started growing inside her. She had to push him away as he started penetrating her mouth with his tongue.
Raafiq was all smiles. He stood up. “Let me take a shower, and then we will do some work tonight. Agreed?”
“Okay.” Rosania felt happy at last as she saw Raafiq leave the room. It was like a big weight off her back. She had been watching and following Raafiq’s orders so far, and now it was time for her to act.
She waited till she heard the noise of the water gushing through the pipes. She rose and began her work. She had to find his bank statement or something that would tell her the source of his money.
Next to the bed, there was a plastic drawer with three compartments. She started with those. The first one had some receipts, a Rubik’s Cube and some glass balls. The second one was full of dried brushes, and in the bottom drawer, she found a plastic Ziploc pouch with white powder inside. She had no doubt about what that white powder was. Despite liberal French drug laws, that kind of volume would certainly put Raafiq in the slam for a few years. The third drawer was empty.
Nothing else interested her in the bedroom. She took a tiny device out of her purse and quickly stuck it behind the base of a phone that hung from the wall. It was a bug that would stick to any piece of iron, and its signals could be picked up by a receiver two hundred meters away. Her co-workers would just have to be within a short distance to listen to Raafiq’s conversations.
She moved to the living room and checked out the drawers of the coffee table, and then sifted through the books and magazines in the bookcase.

Nothing of importance.
Get real, girl, who keeps their bank statements in the living room.
She went to the kitchen, skipped the drawers, and opened the first of the three cupboards – a few spice boxes lay there. She moved on to the next one and saw some stacked papers. She felt overjoyed, thinking she found what she was looking for.
But her enthusiasm dissipated immediately as she heard the bathroom door crack open. She turned around and saw Raafiq standing there, a white towel wrapped around his waist, a few beads of water still on his forehead, his hair looking wet.
"What are you doing there?" he asked with a suspicious look.
"I'm looking for a drink. My throat is dry, like a piece of wood," she quipped. "And you have been so rude; you haven't even offered me a drink."
"Actually I did, you refused." Raafiq came close. His whole body was freckled with brown dots. Even after the bath, he smelled of tobacco. He grabbed her face and gave it a shake. "What do you want? Wine? Whisky?"
"Do you have any rum? You see, as the night gets darker, I like stronger drink." She gave his ass a slap.
"You naughty girl. Of course I do. I keep everything here. Go back to bedroom. I will get your rum."
She went back to the bedroom, sat on the bed, and patiently waited. Raafiq walked in after a minute, with two glasses in his hand. The towel was gone, and he was now wearing a tiny pair of European-style shorts, and he was naked from the waist up. His Adam's apple looked bigger than before.
She took her glass and started drinking, pretending to enjoy it.
Raafiq sat next to her and started kissing her; his hands moved across her body, and she let him do it – she had to. She placed her glass on the corner table, right next to her purse.
Raafiq placed his glass on the floor and then gently laid her on the bed. He took her scarf off, then her top, and then her bra. He kissed her nipple.
She closed her eyes and lay still as Raafiq slowly unzipped her skirt and pulled it down. She felt something was stuck in her throat when he took her panties off, leaving her naked on the edge of the bed. She felt as if her heart was being crushed and her lungs had been run over by a hundred-ton truck.
Raafiq mounted her, and soon the back and forth motion started.

A few minutes later, Raafiq slid off her, and Rosania pushed him away and sat up. She glanced at Raafiq, who was almost dozing, picked up her clothes, purse, and Raafiq's drink and headed for the bathroom. She cleaned herself and then took out the pouch from her purse and poured the tranquilizer in Raafiq's drink. She watched the powder mix in the drink without any shaking, and it didn't even leave a residue. She checked herself in the mirror and then headed back to the bedroom.

He was still lying on the bed, his eyes looked tired, and he was still naked. She dangled the glass in front of him. "I took your glass, thinking it was mine. Now come, finish this drink; be a man! Correct me if I'm wrong, but don't we have a lot of work to do tonight?"

Raafiq grudgingly sat up, took the glass and drank.

A few minutes later, Raafiq lay on the bed, unconscious. Rosania went back to the kitchen and pulled out the papers from the cupboard. They looked like bank statements. She took out her lipstick camera and quickly took pictures of the documents and put the papers back where they were, and then she headed back to the bedroom.

Raafiq was sleeping like a goat. Rosania felt an urge to kick him in the chest but decided not to. It might have woken him up and ruined her mission. She walked around the flat one more time and came back to the bedroom. To her, it looked like Raafiq was not breathing.

She became scared and called Andy. "I think I killed the guy."

"That stuff we gave you cannot kill anyone," Andy said in his usual confident voice.

"But I think he isn't breathing."

"Check his pulse."

Rosania went back to Raafiq and felt his wrist. Indeed, his heart was beating. "I think he'll live," she said into the phone. "I've placed the bug and have taken pictures of his bank statements. Now send someone to take me back to the house."

"Okay, don't worry. We will be there in two minutes. We'll text you once we reach his place. Okay?"

She was picked up by Andy at two a.m. when most of Paris was sleeping. The car raced through empty streets.

"Good job, Rosania." Andy took his hand off the steering wheel and patted her shoulder. "I'm proud of you."

She said nothing.

CHAPTER 18

The light inside the Arabian restaurant was dim; diners spoke in low voices. Hindi music could be heard, but it seemed as if it was coming from a far-off place.

The white-dressed maître d' escorted Doerr to a corner table with two chairs. He ordered some red wine and started taking a mental image of the people eating their dinner. He saw a man chide his much younger wife, and the woman wiped her tears with the corner of her *niqab*.

A few minutes later, Rosania appeared, dressed in a long skirt that almost touched her toes. She said something to the maître d', and he took her to the table where Doerr was seated. Doerr was expecting her. Lazarus had told him that Rosania would be his partner in the operation to locate Halim. Lazarus had told him that she was an able, intelligent and astute field officer. But Doerr didn't need to be told.

This was not the first time Doerr had worked with her. Five years ago, she had been his partner in an operation to trap and take out a Russian agent in Belgium.

She took a seat, and a few seconds later, a white-tunic-clad waiter took Rosania's order of a glass of soda.

After the waiter left, she said to Doerr, "It is nice to see you after such a long time."

"I'm glad to see you, as well." Doerr leaned forward with the glass in his hand. "How have you been? I've heard a lot about your recent triumphs."

"I'm pretty good." She took the napkin from the table and spread it on her lap. "Though I haven't heard any of your *triumphs* lately. How come?"

"I was doing news editing."

"Don't tell me the agency pays you to do that sort of work."

"Actually, I wasn't with the agency for some time, and I took a job with a newspaper in New York."

"Really?" Rosania said. The white-tunic-clad waiter came back with Rosania's soda and asked if they were ready to order dinner. Doerr and Rosania ordered their food, and the waiter left.

"Which newspaper did you work for?" she asked.

"Why don't we talk about that another day? I see you speak English much better now."

"I did some work in London."

“Good for you. What did you do there?”
“Why don’t we talk about it *later*?” She threw Doerr’s exact words back to him and smiled. “Tell me about what we are about to do.”
The waiter brought Doerr’s chicken biryani and Rosania’s goat shish kabobs and placed them on the table. The aroma of the Middle Eastern spicy food filled the air.
“Let’s eat dinner first.” Doerr eyed the food. “Then we will walk and talk work. Someone might be eavesdropping here, you never know.”
She nodded, and they got busy with their food.
Forty minutes later, Doerr paid for the dinner with his card and walked out of the restaurant. Rosania followed him. They sauntered toward the taxi place, about three hundred feet away from the restaurant. Doerr took out a cigarette, lit it, and took a drag.
“Let’s talk about work,” Doerr said. “We got a lead on one of Halim’s right-hand men. His name is Ahmad. He goes to a bar that we have marked up. Now you will go there and entice him to a hotel. And don’t forget to put on a man’s dress before you go in.”
“How did you get the lead? Did someone provide that to you?”
“No.” Doerr glanced at her. “I had to do some work to get it.”
“What did you do exactly?”
“How shall I say – I spent nights without sleep, and I had to visit some corners of this city that many of its inhabitants have never visited. I spoke to over a hundred people. Made false promises to many of them, spent three hundred thousand dollars of American taxpayers’ money, bribing officials, and I got the name of this man – Ahmad. I got many other names, but I think this is our guy. We have to be extremely careful since he is our only solid lead to Halim right now.”
“Why don’t we get Kassem to apprehend this Ahmad guy?” Rosania asked. “Once he is caught, we go in and ask all our questions.”
“Well, there are some problems with that. This Kassem guy may be good on certain things, but he’s pretty much a paranoid son-of-a-bitch. You should see what he has done to some of the people he has in jail, without a charge or evidence. Two of the prisoners will die soon if they are not taken to the hospital. One man is almost paralyzed. When you do that, you get lies from them, not truth. And the other thing is if Kassem picks up Ahmad, with Halim’s money and reach, Ahmad might flee and simply vanish.” Doerr

looked straight into Rosania's eyes. "Some stuff we just have to do ourselves."
Rosania nodded. "So where is this bar?"
"I will mail you the details in a secure email. But you don't really need to know right now. You will be escorted there."
"And what should I tell this man, Ahmad, when I meet him?"
"Tell him that you are an American on a business trip. Show him your beautiful side, and tell him how lonely you feel in the hotel and how you wished that you had a man to sleep with. I'm sure he will follow you like a squirrel looking for nuts. Many men here think a lonely American woman would fuck anyone."
"I'm not going to sleep with some old Arab dude," Rosania said emphatically and angrily kicked a piece of stone as her face became red. "I'm not going to sleep with anyone, end of story."
"When did I say you have to sleep with him? You don't have to unless you want to. All you have to do is bring him to the safe house, and I will take over from there."
"Bring him to the safe house? How am I going to do that? If he is Halim's right-hand man, then he is no dumbo, I think."
"Correct, that's why we brought *you* in this project. If you can't get him in the safe house, then bring him to a hotel room. And we can work with that."
Doerr and Rosania were near the taxi stand; six men and two women stood in a line, waiting for cabs to show up. Rosania said, "One last thing. I don't think I should introduce myself as an American. Ahmad might recognize that I'm not, and it might break my cover. I will introduce myself as an Italian woman."
"Don't worry. Those men sometimes cannot tell the difference between a goat and a woman, let alone an American woman from an Italian one."
"Okay. Got it. I will get him to a room, and then what are you going to do to him?"
"I'm going to ask him a few questions. Before that, we need to administer a truth serum to that bastard. I don't think he will talk without some *help*."
"We are going to use that sodium pentothal stuff?"
"No," Doerr said. "We have an advanced version. When the car comes to pick you up, there will be someone who will show you how to use it."
Rosania turned to Doerr after a few moments of silence. "Is it true that an American woman will fuck anyone when they are lonely?"

“What do you think?”
“I’m not sure. You tell me.”
A cab stopped at the top of the line; another passenger was already inside. The first man in the queue got inside. Doerr tried to see the person who was inside the vehicle already. He looked like a Western man. Doerr took a step toward the cab and noticed the man inside looked like Samuel.
“Hey!” Doerr screamed and rushed to the cab. But the cab started moving and then sped away.
Doerr felt a pang in his chest. The pain, which had subsided to some degree during the last few days, came rushing back. Billy’s dead face flashed in his brain.
“Who was that?” Rosania asked.
“I thought it was someone I used to know. But I can’t be sure.”
“Wow. You have friends here in Dubai, too?”
“No. He lives in America,” Doerr said. “And he is not a friend. Far from it.”
When I see him, and I will, I will kill him, Doerr thought. *The son-of-a-bitch deserves to be killed, and the world will be a better place without him.*
Doerr was in Dubai doing this and that, tracking this guy or that guy, just so that he could use the CIA’s resources to go after Samuel and take him down. Going after him alone, which he had considered, would be like looking for a needle in a haystack.

HALIM WAS EXPECTING Faizan in the conference room of his favorite hotel in Dubai. Halim did not want anyone else to be present. The windows were closed and the blinds drawn; the only source of light in the room was cast from the dim ceiling light at the center of the room.
He was ready to give the big news to Faizan. Everything had fallen into place: all the paperwork was complete, all accomplices had been alerted, dates communicated, and all arrangements had been made, including the hundred thousand dollars cash he had withdrawn the day before, which now sat inside the black briefcase placed before him on the shiny wooden table.
Halim waited in the room, wondering if he had indeed chosen the right man for this operation. An operation, if executed as per the plan, that would shock the Western world, make all Muslim brothers proud, and the rest of the world cringe with fear for their lives and prospects.

Halim looked at the door and then at the briefcase, wondering why Faizan was so late. He checked his watch; it was time for a prayer.
He rose from the table and then knelt down on the floor and started the ritual with his eyes closed.
After ten minutes, he took a deep breath and opened his eyes. He saw Faizan sitting next to him, his eyes shut.
Faizan drew his palms to his chest, eyes still closed but lips moving, obviously saying his prayer silently.
Faizan finally opened his eyes; Halim was looking at him with a smile on his lips.
“What did you pray for?” Halim asked.
“I prayed to Allah to give me enough strength so that I can go to the infidel country and teach them a lesson they will never forget.”
“My son,” Halim said, “Allah has already given you that. The Almighty will reward you very soon. Now, come and sit here, and tell me why you were late.” He pointed to the chair across the table and sat back on his chair.
Faizan sat down. “It was my cab driver’s fault. He took the wrong route and delayed me. I broke his jaw and plucked his teeth. I have his teeth right here.” He opened his palm and showed Halim the pair of broken teeth he was holding.
Halim looked at Faizan affectionately, and whatever doubt he had about the young man was gone. He was sure that he had chosen the right man. Faizan was a brilliant student, a quick learner, strong and well built, revengeful, dedicated to the cause, and most importantly, now he was not afraid to die. The mullahs had done a good job on Faizan.
“I have everything right here,” Halim said as he rested his left arm on the chair arm and lifted his right hand to touch his chin. His beard glistened, and his lips were pursed. With a click, Halim opened the briefcase. On one side were the bundles of twenty and hundred-dollar bills, in the middle a stack of papers, a few maps, two pens, a passport and two books.
“Let’s go through the plan, in detail, one more time,” Halim said and patted the dollar bills. “Tomorrow you will be flying to Mexico City.”

HALIM STOOD IN front of the window of his Dubai hotel room. He felt satisfied that his dream of striking the great Satan inside America was about

to happen. He had confidence in Faizan and faith in all the folks who would be helping Faizan in the big operation.

His cell phone rang, and he checked the caller ID. It was one of his guys from Paris.

“Hello,” Halim answered.

“I am afraid I have some bad news, boss.”

“What happened?”

“Raafiq.” The man paused.

“What? What happened to Raafiq?” Halim asked anxiously.

“Boss, Raafiq has been picked up by the French police. And they have locked him up.”

“What? Haven’t you talked to a lawyer?”

“Yes, boss. We contacted three lawyers. All of them said it does not look good for Raafiq. Police found more than a kilo of cocaine and seven high-value stolen paintings in his flat. Raafiq is looking at five to ten years in jail.”

Halim sighed. “Can’t we bribe the jailor and get him out of there?”

“Yes, we have already talked to the jailor through someone. He is asking for a million euros. We offered a quarter mil, then increased the offer to half a mil. But the jailor is standing his ground on a million euros. He says he will have to get his entire family out of the country after this.”

“You are negotiating on my brother’s freedom? You asshole.”

“Sorry, boss. But we don’t have that much cash. And that’s why I’m calling you.”

“Let me turn my laptop on. The fucking cash will be in your account in less than an hour. I want to see Raafiq freed within twenty-four hours.”

“I will do my best, boss.”

“Now,” Halim said, “do you have a plan to get Raafiq out of France?”

“Yes, boss. We made a plan already. I will drive Raafiq out of the country myself. He will be disguised as my wife in traditional Muslim dress.”

ROSANIA WAS PICKED up by a black sedan at exactly six thirty p.m. Inside the vehicle, there was another man, apart from the driver, who gave her the truth serum and told her how to administer it.

The sedan dropped her at the bar thirty minutes later. The bar was in an office area, and the road was nearly deserted. The sun had set nearly an

hour ago, leaving the place at the mercy of the lights hanging from the tall posts that stood exactly ten meters apart.

The bar was between a bank and a restaurant. The door was made of dark glass with a red neon ‘open’ sign on it. From outside, the bar looked like another restaurant. Rosania could tell that it was a secret bar where local men came to booze.

Rosania wore black jeans and a loose striped shirt, underneath which she had tightly wrapped bands that flattened her breasts. She wore a fake mustache and beard to give her a manly look and hide her femininity.

She put her hand inside her jeans pocket and pulled out a photo and took one last look at Ahmad’s picture. She pushed open the door. Inside, two men stood in traditional attire and checked her appearance. The men nodded and showed her inside.

She walked in and took a quick mental scan of the area, where about thirty patrons were sitting and drinking. There were six tables with four chairs around each of them, most of them occupied. About fifteen stools lined the bar, behind which three bartenders stood serving alcohol.

The bartender came by to take her order. She simply pointed to the picture of a beer bottle, indicating that was what she wanted. She did not want to talk.

She saw Ahmad, who was enjoying a glass of red wine, sitting alone on a stool. Other customers were talking and enjoying their drinks. Some were alone. In the opposite corner, two men sat in *thobe*, drinking and engaged in some serious talk.

Rosania sipped her beer and threw Ahmad a few stares, and Ahmad looked back at her. *The plan is working.*

She was feeling tight in her bladder, but she knew it would be too much to handle in a men’s room. Bathrooms in such places were usually not well maintained anyway.

Rosania finished her beer, took out a pack of cigarettes from her pocket and looked around. It was time for action. She held the cigarette pack in one hand; she gave an impression that she was searching for a lighter. When Rosania looked at Ahmad, the man was staring at her. She slowly rose from her chair and proceeded toward him.

The man had a thick nose, but because of the size of his beard, it was not conspicuous. He wore a white tunic with large chest pockets, out of one of

which he took out a gas lighter and offered it to Rosania as soon as she reached him.
She lit her cigarette and let out some thick smoke. She started to talk, saying how she found Dubai to be such a comfortable place and everyone was so friendly.
Ahmad took a sip of his drink. “People here help out each other all the time. And if an outsider needs anything, we help out in every possible way.”
Rosania took another deep drag. “It’s a bit stuffy here. I’m going out to finish smoking. Do you want to join me?”
The man rose slowly. Together, two of them walked out of the bar. The road was deserted, just like before when she had entered there. Occasional cabs drove by. Rosania offered Ahmad the Marlboro pack, and he took a cigarette and lit it.
“Where you from?” Ahmad asked.
“I am from America.” She took off her beard and showed him her face. “I am a woman. I like drinking and company, but the bar people don’t allow women inside; that’s why I dressed like this.”
Ahmad nodded. *Let the charade begin,* she thought. “I am here for business; I work for an oil company. And the hotel is so boring. So I came here for some company. Would you like to come and visit me at the hotel?”
Ahmad appeared to be mulling over the offer.
“We can have a few drinks. I’ve got a bottle of Le Pin wine and some Cuban cigars. We can smoke, drink and talk. What do you say?”
Ahmad’s facial expression told Rosania that the lure of the expensive wine and cigars was too much for him to resist. Perhaps the biggest allure that hung in the air was the unspoken possibility of sex. Rosania raised her hand when she saw a taxi approaching.
Soon they were in the vehicle, headed for the hotel where Rosania was staying. There were plenty of people in the lobby when they arrived; some were sitting, reading newspapers, and some watched the TV and drank coffee or wine.
Rosania and Ahmad took the elevator to her room.
Once inside, Rosania said, “Have a seat, please,” and pointed to the recliner chair that lay three feet away from the large glass window, through which a picturesque view of the city skyline was visible. It was a fairly big room, maybe thirty by twenty feet wide. She turned the TV on and moved to the

area where the fridge and the queen-sized bed were. The bed was made up with immaculate sheets and two large pillows.
Ahmad sat down and started watching the TV as Rosania took out the bottle of wine. She poured two glasses and surreptitiously added the serum from her ring into one glass and glanced at Ahmad, who was amused by whatever was being shown on the TV. The serum dissolved into the wine without a trace. She was told that the chemical would make a person lose eighty percent of his ability to imagine.
She sauntered to Ahmad and handed him the medicated glass. “Here you go. I hope you like it.”
Ahmad smiled as he took the glass.
Rosania took a sip and said, “Tell me whether you like the wine.”
Ahmad raised the glass to his lips and drank. He waited a few seconds. “Excellent,” he said.
“Give me a sec,” said Rosania and headed for the bathroom. Once in there, she took her cell phone out and sent a text message to Doerr – ‘man locked in cell,’ the agreed-upon code phrase.
She threw water at her face and then dried herself with a soft white towel. She took two cigars from a box, opened the bathroom door and stepped out. As soon as she saw Ahmad, she froze.
Ahmad held a pistol in his right hand and the glass of wine in his left hand. He gave her a sharp look as she took steps toward him.
“Ahmad!” she said.
“Tell me who you work for,” Ahmad said in a menacing tone and pointed the gun at her.

DOERR RECEIVED THE text message from Rosania. It meant Ahmad was ready for questioning in her hotel room. Doerr dialed the number of a taxi company and made arrangements to be picked up. He took his 9mm Glock from his suitcase, checked its magazine and then tucked it into the waistband of his jeans. He took a piece of paper from the table. It had all the sixteen questions that he wanted to ask Ahmad. He folded the paper twice and placed it inside his pocket. He had memorized all the queries but took the paper with him anyway.
Forty minutes later, Doerr knocked on Rosania’s door.

CHAPTER 19

Faizan took an early flight out of Dubai International Airport, heading for Mexico City. Sitting in an economy seat, he flipped through the pages in his Egyptian passport as the pilot read the safety procedures, and the flight attendants demonstrated them. During the long flight, Faizan could not stop thinking about Halim, who was the epitome of power, success, and sacrifice. Halim could easily carry on a luxurious life; he could have twenty wives and thirty kids. But that was not what he had done. Halim had chosen a hard life. He traveled across the globe, helping brothers, and he had only one wife, for business reasons, and no children.

Faizan felt grateful to the mullahs who had put him on the right course. "Your life is for the purpose for which you were created, my son. Islam teaches you to donate and give. So give for the cause that the great leader Halim sets for you. Giving does not exclude giving your own life. And the Great Satan has to be punished," the mullah had told him.

Faizan had realized the truth in what the mullah was saying. He had to sacrifice his life and walk the path shown by Halim. Faizan was ready to teach the Great Satan a great lesson, and if he had to give up his own life, so be it.

Faizan landed in Mexico City in the evening of the same day. It was an arduous day, but the next day would be more so, and the day after – even harder. Faizan knew that.

At the airport, he was picked up by three rough-looking men. It was all part of the plan that Halim had explained to him the day before. Faizan got into a white pickup truck driven by the three men—Diego, Felix and Rodney—in shifts. Diego was the tallest of them and seemed to be their leader. Felix was a little shorter, perhaps five feet eight inches tall, and had tattoos all over his arms, shoulders and even his face. Rodney was the same height, but he was the friendliest. Rodney spoke to Faizan a lot, in broken English. Faizan understood that he was not the only one who was headed for America. Those four bags in the rear cargo area would be traveling into America along with him. He had no doubt about what was in those bags – marijuana. He had smoked it in college a few times; the smell was unmistakable. Rodney explained it to him – Faizan and those bags would be transported together. Although traveling with marijuana bags was not

detailed in the plan, he did not mind as long as he reached American soil to do what he had been sent to do.

They drove through the night and took sporadic breaks. The ride was bumpy, so no one slept, except Rodney, who slept like a baby, and his head wobbled whenever the tires ran into a pothole. But as soon as Rodney woke in the morning, he started talking nonstop till the leader, Felix, shut him down with a loud, ‘Hey, shut up your fucking mouth. Let me focus on driving!’

They continued through the day. For lunch, they stopped at a ragtag restaurant in the middle of nowhere. Faizan and the three men sat down on the bench outside, and a man came out. Felix ordered chicken tacos for everyone.

After a short wait, a boy brought out a bunch of tacos on a porcelain plate that was chipped in a few places at the edge. Faizan picked up a taco and was about to put it in his mouth.

He stopped, wondering whether the chicken was *halal*. There was no point asking the boy, and he remembered what Halim had said – ignore petty things and focus on the big goal. He started munching the tacos and found he liked them.

Three hours later, Faizan thought he saw a board that said ‘Welcome to Nuevo Laredo.’ The pickup truck drove through a labyrinth of roads and finally stopped near a large tree. Faizan saw a river in the background, and he knew it was Rio Grande. On the other side of the river was America. He tried to look for a road on the American side, but all he saw was the ground covered by trees and grass.

The truck stopped near the riverbank, and a boat could be seen nearby. The four men stood behind the large tree, about fifty feet from the riverbank. It was 4.30 p.m., and the sun was about to go hiding.

“Once it gets dark, we will drag that boat into the river,” Rodney explained to Faizan. “We pull those bags from the truck into the boat, and then you and I will get in, and we will row to the other side. You will get off the boat along with the bags. Two men will be waiting on the other side to take you wherever you are headed.”

“Why don’t we start now?” Faizan asked.

“Are you crazy?” Rodney pointed at the river. “American police will come out in boats if they see us. They will shoot at us, try to chase us away. And if we are really unlucky, they will catch and put us in jail.”

Faizan had not gone to so much trouble to be caught by the police and placed in a prison. He sighed and looked back. The truck and the other two men were gone, leaving tire marks on the grass. He waited, along with Rodney, near the Rio Grande River for night to fall so he could take the next step closer to his destination. He peered at the landscape beyond the river.

That's America, the Satan, he thought.

DOERR KNOCKED ON Rosania's hotel door and waited. Nothing. He knocked again, and a few seconds later, he heard footsteps inside. Someone was hurrying around. Suddenly Doerr felt anxious and worried about Rosania.

He knocked a third time, and the door opened. A stocky man with a thick beard stood in front of him, his right hand tucked behind him.

The man took two steps back. Doerr was sure it was Ahmad.

Ahmad made a motion with his hand, indicating that he wanted Doerr to come in.

Doerr raised his foot, which trembled a bit. Doubt pervaded his mind – should he enter, should he not? The man was obviously hiding some sort of weapon in his hand. Doerr didn't give the doubt time to settle in his mind. Rosania was inside, he was sure, and she was certainly in danger. Doerr scanned the room visually, as far as he could see – no Rosania.

Doerr walked past Ahmad, keeping a close eye on him. He could easily take Ahmad down, but he decided to wait. An elbow to the jaw and a quick knee into the man's bulging stomach would have done the job. But he decided to be patient.

"Go and sit there, please." Ahmad pointed to the chair at the end of the room. Ahmad's voice was as thick as his beard.

Doerr walked slowly and observed the taut bed sheet.

Good, no one has been on it lately, Doerr thought.

Doerr turned and sat down on the chair.

"Would you like to drink something? Maybe some wine?" Ahmad asked mockingly.

"No, I'm fine." Doerr understood why Ahmad said it in such a way. He had been lured into this room, in part, with an expensive wine.

Ahmad walked forward, a gun in his hand. Ahmad raised it and pointed it straight at Doerr's head, and then he asked, "You work for the CIA too?"
Doerr nodded.
Ahmad came forward and stood about five feet from Doerr. Ahmad took a quick look back, as if checking if he was being followed.
Doerr could still do it. He could stand up and throw a flash kick at Ahmad's hand, all in a fraction of a second, and the gun would fly in the air. But he decided to wait.
"What you want?" Ahmad pulled out a chair and sat face to face with Doerr, his face stern and the gun pointed straight at him.
"We want to know where Halim is." Doerr looked down and avoided eye contact with the man before him.
"Halim? Huh?" Ahmad took a quick peek at the TV, and that was the third time Doerr could have overwhelmed the guy, but, once again, he decided to wait. Doerr knew the man didn't have any military training, and from the way he was handling his gun, Doerr was sure Halim hadn't given him any training either.
"Yes, Halim," Doerr said. "He is about to attack Americans in some way, and we are going to find him and stop him."
"You seem to be a confident man."
Doerr said nothing for a few seconds and then asked, "Where is he?"
"Where is who?" Ahmad's tone was commanding. Perhaps he wanted to remind Doerr that it was Ahmad who was in charge.
"I was talking about Halim."
"I don't know where Halim is. As a matter of fact, I don't even know *who* Halim is."
"Ah-huh." Doerr knew the game Ahmad was playing. The nose of the barrel was pointing straight at him. If fired, it would hit his chest or upper abdomen. Three different men had confirmed that Ahmad was one of Halim's close accomplices. *Keep calm*, Doerr told himself. *This is the wrong time to do some hot-headed shit.*
"Which office do you work out of?" Ahmad asked. His English was pretty good given that he had never set foot outside of the Middle East.
"I beg your pardon?"
"I asked which CIA office you work from."
"Oh. I work at a place called Allentown, Pennsylvania." That was not a total lie. Doerr had trained at a place close to Allentown, years back. "Have

you ever been there?”
“Where? America? No, why would I visit the infidel country? I have a cousin who is now settled in America. I don’t understand why people even go to America. Why do you think people go there? Is it all about money?”
“I was born there,” Doerr said. “So I don’t know why people move there. Maybe they like the weather or the American food.” Doerr repositioned his legs so that he could spring out of the chair and grab the man’s throat the next chance he would get. He had waited long enough.
“No.” Ahmad shook his head. “I think it’s just the money. People are greedy, nowadays. And American food sucks. I tried eating a burger and some fries at one of our malls – awful. I don’t know how you people eat that shit.”
Doerr looked into Ahmad’s eyes. They were full of hate. Doerr waited for Ahmad’s eyes to veer away.
“America gives so much money to Israel,” Ahmad continued. “And Israel does anything America asks it to do, without shame. They kill innocent children and women in Gaza and elsewhere.”
“What do you guys do to your own women? Shackle them. Jail them. Mask them. See.” Doerr pointed his hand to the TV, where a *burqua*-clad woman was saying something.
Doerr’s legs were ready, muscles taut; his mind was focused, fixed on the action ahead. On the TV, they were showing some protesters participating in a procession in Jordan. Ahmad took a sidelong view at the TV. That was the opportunity Doerr had been waiting for. He pushed his butt up and lunged at Ahmad. He grabbed Ahmad’s wrist and jerked it forcefully, and the gun fell on the carpet. Ahmad looked shocked at first, but within a second he seemed to recover and kicked Doerr’s stomach with his knee. Doerr was expecting it, so the kick hurt very little. Doerr passed his hand under Ahmad’s knee and pulled him up. The chair toppled; Ahmad fell on the floor, and his white headscarf fell too. Doerr planted one knee on Ahmad’s chest and jabbed his cheek. Ahmad shrieked in pain. Doerr jabbed him one more time, and blood appeared on Ahmad’s lips.
Doerr grabbed him by his thick beard. “What did you do to Rosania? Where is she?”
Ahmad said nothing and tried to jerk himself free. Unsuccessfully. Doerr hit his face again. “Tell me; where is she?”

“She is in the bathroom.” Ahmad’s blood-covered lips moved. “Now let me go.”

Doerr stood up and picked up the gun quickly. “Stay on the floor. Don’t get up.”

Doerr walked to the bathroom, keeping the gun pointed at Ahmad. He opened the bathroom door, and there she was – gagged with her own scarf, sitting on the white toilet, the lid closed, and her hands tied with another piece of cloth that went from her hands around the water tank attached to the toilet. She tried to say something with her muted voice once she saw Doerr, but he did not understand. He took a quick look at Ahmad, who was still on the floor, and then quickly freed her.

Fifteen minutes later, Doerr’s and Ahmad’s positions were reversed; the gun was in Doerr’s hand, and Rosania sat on the edge of the bed. The drape on the glass door to the balcony was closed.

“Now, Ahmad, tell me; where is Halim?” Doerr asked with a serious tone.

“Where is Halim?” Ahmad mocked and lowered his chin. His beard was covered with blood, his shirt bloody.

“If you don’t tell us, you die here,” Rosania said. “No one knows you are here.”

“I sent a text to my wife. They will be looking for me soon. You all are foreigners. Once our police catch you, you will be sent to jail with a long sentence.”

“Don’t worry about us,” Doerr said cynically. “Did you text the room number?”

“Yes.”

“When did you send the text?” Rosania asked. “I didn’t see you use your cell phone.”

“I sent it when I was in the cab.”

“Take his cell phone out.” Rosania looked at Doerr. “And check it.”

“I don’t think there is a need.” Doerr turned to Ahmad. “How did you know the room number when you were in the cab? You are lying, aren’t you?”

Ahmad said nothing. His silence said it all. Doerr stood up and forced the barrel of the gun in Ahmad’s mouth. The grating noise of metal colliding with teeth was loud in the quiet room. “Tell us what plan Halim is hatching, or you die here.”

Ahmad’s head tilted backward. Doerr saw Ahmad’s mouth filling up with blood.

Doerr withdrew the gun and pressed the mouth of the barrel against Ahmad’s forehead. “Tell us now. Our patience is running out!”
“Okay. I will tell you.”
Doerr lowered his gun and pulled his chair closer to Ahmad. Rosania clasped her arms together at her chest.
“I don’t know where Halim is,” Ahmad continued. “Very few people actually know his whereabouts. I met with him a few weeks back, and that was it. I haven’t heard from him again.”
“Tell me about your last meeting with Halim,” Doerr said. “Who else was there?”
“It was just me, Halim and Faizan.”
“Who is Faizan?”
“Faizan was a new recruit. He is an Egyptian student whose visa was rejected by the American consulate in Cairo.”
“And what did you guys talk about in the meeting?” Doerr asked.
“Nothing much,” Ahmad said in a nonchalant way.
“Nothing much?” Doerr screamed, stood up and raised the gun as if he was about to hit Ahmad’s head.
“Halim had a plan,” Ahmad said quickly. “He was going send Faizan to the center of American power, and something big was going to happen.”
“If Faizan didn’t have a visa,” Rosania said, “how is he going to get to America?”
“I don’t know that part. Halim said he would work on it.”
“What else?” Doerr asked. “You guys must have talked about something else. Where exactly in America was Faizan going to go? Where will he stay?”
“Halim said he knew a professor who Faizan could stay with for a few days. Now, I’ve told you everything I know. Please, let me go to my family. They will be worried.”
Doerr glanced at his watch. It was 9:45 p.m.
Rosania stood up and said to Ahmad, “Why should we worry about your family when you people are out to destroy us?”
“Who is *you people*, and who is *us*?” Ahmad said, his tone confident, spiked with anger. “Muslims against you Westerners? That we are out to kill the rest of the world? You know the Muslim religion is very peaceful. We greet one another saying ‘*salaam alekum*.’ Do you know what it means?”
“No,” Rosania said.

“It means ‘may peace be with you.’ We are not at all violent. But we have been projected to be.”
“Shut up! We are not here to listen to your lecture,” Doerr demanded, holding the gun in one hand and patting it with the other. “Tell us more about Faizan.”
They talked for another thirty minutes. There was no new information. Doerr was fairly confident that Ahmad was being truthful. He let Ahmad clean up in the bathroom, and then Ahmad left.
Rosania started packing her stuff. Doerr knew Rosania had to switch to a new hotel. Ahmad would not go to the cops in a million years, but he could return with some of Halim’s armed goons.
“So all we know is that an Egyptian guy named Faizan is headed for America,” Doerr said.
Rosania placed her clothes in her suitcase. “Didn’t Ahmad say Faizan could be staying with a professor for a few days? So narrow it down to a professor from the Middle East.”
“Do you know how many professors there are in America? Over a million. I’m sure there are thousands and thousands of lecturers who are originally from the Middle East.” Doerr paused. “And Faizan is heading to America’s power center. That means he is going to Washington or maybe New York. Maybe he is in America already.”
“Maybe. What I don’t understand is why Ahmad became so chummy with us in the end.”
“Did you put the serum in his wine?” Doerr asked.
“Yes.”
“And did he drink it?”
“I’m not sure.” Rosania closed the lid of her suitcase and thought for a second. “*He must have*. I saw his glass was empty.”
“Then there you go. The serum and guns make people talk. And Ahmad is not stupid,” Doerr said. “How much longer are you going to take to pack up?”
“Another fifteen minutes perhaps. Why?”
“I’ve got to call the FBI CTD right now.”
“I know the FBI,” Rosania said. “But what is CTD?”
“Counter Terrorism Department. We have to track down Faizan. Something is telling me he’s already in America.”

ONCE DARKNESS FELL, Faizan and Rodney dragged the small boat across the soft soil. They had placed the marijuana bags in the boat already. Only some distant sodium vapor lights were visible, and the constant noise of the crickets was audible. By the time the boat was near the water, both Faizan and Rodney were exhausted and breathed heavily.

“Let’s take a break.” Rodney stood close to the boat and bent forward a little. Faizan opened his duffel bag, inserted his hands inside and felt the barrels of two AK-74 rifles, the same firearm he had trained with in Somalia.

Also accompanying the rifles were three hundred rounds of ammunition. Felix had handed over the firearms before leaving New Mexico City. Everything was going according to the plan.

Rodney started pushing the boat, and Faizan joined him. The gentle sound of water splashing could be heard.

Soon the boat was afloat on the dark surface of the river. Faizan jumped into the vessel first. Rodney gave one last push, and he jumped into the boat.

The two men rowed with small wooden planks, bringing the boat closer to the American soil. When the boat was near the midpoint in the quiet waters of the river, Rodney pulled out his cell phone and typed something fast.

“What’s that?” Faizan asked.

“I’m texting guys on the other side. They come to pick you and those up.” Rodney pointed his hand to the marijuana bags. “Don’t talk now. I hear the American police have electronics that can pick up even low voices.”

The two men kept rowing slowly but steadily, without creating any splashing cacophony. The boat moved forward through the darkness; only a thin slice of the moon was visible in the sky.

It did not take long to cross the three-hundred-foot-wide river. Twenty minutes later, the boat landed against the American riverbank with a jerk. Faizan saw two shadows appear, and then they approached the boat.

Here is my ride, Faizan thought. *Those must be the two men Rodney talked about*.

The taller of the two men was near the boat; he asked Faizan in a hushed voice, “Ready, *amigo*?”

Faizan nodded and picked up his duffel bag. The two men lifted the marijuana bags, and Rodney started rowing back to Mexico. Within

minutes, Rodney and the boat disappeared into the darkness.

AN HOUR LATER, an Impala was moving at seventy miles an hour on I-20 West Highway. The two men were riding in the front seats, and Faizan sat in the rear, keeping his right hand over the duffel bag. He looked out of the window, but he could only make out the pairs of headlights of the oncoming cars and the rear lights of the cars ahead. The Impala took an exit, and after a few turns, it stopped at the parking lot of a Walmart store, right next to a black sedan.

The man from the Impala's passenger seat alighted and walked to the trunk of the vehicle. He pulled out the marijuana bags, put them in the trunk of the black sedan, and then he sat in the vehicle.

Now, Faizan was left inside the Impala with just the driver, who was a little older and a little taller than Faizan, perhaps twenty-eight or twenty-nine years old and six feet two inches tall. He had an unshaved beard and a thin mustache.

"Come to the front, *amigo*?" the driver said to Faizan.

"No, I'm fine here," said Faizan. He remembered what Halim had told him – "Be friendly but avoid unnecessary conversations. If you talk too much, you might give away things that you did not want to."

A few seconds later, Faizan checked the car clock – 10:20 p.m. He said to the driver, "I just want to get some sleep. I will sleep better here."

The driver backed out the Impala and pulled out of the parking lot. "Yes, get some sleep, *amigo*. We will be driving the whole night today and the whole day tomorrow. And hopefully tomorrow night sometime we should reach Augusta."

Augusta, Georgia, was where the professor lived and where Faizan was headed. The plan was that Faizan would stay there for two or three days and then start the last leg of his journey, culminating in the *big event* that would teach the Great Satan America a lesson and terrorize its citizens.

Faizan inserted his hand inside the bag and touched the barrel of his gun. He closed his eyes and could visualize the bullets coming out of the barrel and entering bodies of bystanders. *When the moment comes*, he thought, *the barrel will be pointed at women and children first*.

The soft targets first, Halim had told him so.

DOERR TALKED TO Mark Louder, the high-ranking official at the Counter Terrorism Department of the FBI, and gave him all the details he had about Faizan, which were not many. Louder agreed to contact the Cairo consulate and get more information about Faizan from his visa application.

A day later, Doerr received a call from Louder. It was ten minutes past midnight in Dubai and 4:10 p.m. in Washington. Doerr had just fallen asleep after a hectic day but snapped awake and picked up the phone on the second ring. He'd had an idea that Louder would be calling soon with some good news.

"Hello," Doerr said into his phone.

"There are five Faizans whose visas were rejected at Cairo in the last three months." Louder was a fast-acting and straight-talking man. "Three students and two tourists."

"APBs have been issued on all of them?" Doerr asked.

"No. We can't issue APBs without knowing which Faizan we're looking for."

"Just issue APBs for all five of them!"

"And you expect results from that?" Louder's tone turned unfriendly. "First, none of them have done anything yet. Second, don't you think if we issue APBs just like that, they will become ineffective? We are just working based on some theory here, aren't we?"

"We have received information from multiple sources. This Faizan guy is trying to get into the US or may have gotten in already. He is about to do something really big." Doerr could not keep his composure anymore and was screaming into his phone. "And you are telling me you can't issue those APBs?"

"If you have multiple sources, then why can't one of them give you a photo or a sketch of Faizan? That will surely help. We are contacting the Egyptian authorities for help, and we are running the names by all our Canadian consulates. People always try to come through Canada once their visas are rejected in their own country."

"For now, issue the APBs for all five." Doerr's voice was calmer now. "We will try to get a sketch of Faizan. Then you can zero in on one person."

"Yeah, you do that. We will be waiting for the picture."

"So you are not going to issue any APBs?"

"I will see what I can do. I'll have to talk to my boss first. Okay?"

DOERR GOT UP at six in the morning, and he took a cab straight to Kassem's office. The morning Dubai traffic rush was yet to start.

When he reached Kassem's office, it was open, but there was no receptionist. Doerr knew Kassem usually started work early, so he proceeded to the chief's office.

Doerr saw Kassem rummaging through some papers, looking for something. Doerr stood at the door and cleared his throat.

"Welcome back, Doerr," Kassem said. "What brings you here again?"

"I need to go to Ahmad's house and take him to a sketch artist. Can you lend me some of your people? So I can pick him up."

"Sure." Kassem stood up. "Actually, I'm going to come along. I want to put an end to this whole darn thing."

Kassem made a few calls, and after twenty minutes, Doerr was riding in an Emirate police car. Kassem and three other policemen accompanied him.

The car raced down the highway that bisected the downtown area. Palm trees were standing tall on either side. A black BMW coupe was ahead of them. The car moved to the right, clearing the path for the police car.

Soon, the police vehicle left the highway and took a narrow road. Traffic became congested, and the road was riddled with potholes. People walked by on both sides of the road, and the hawkers advertised their goods, fruits, and some cotton products, with loud voices.

After a long, bumpy ride, the police car stopped in front of a three-story building. The wall was white, and the roof was built in Cape Cod style. No one could be seen outside the building. All the men, including Doerr, got out of the car.

"That Ahmad fucker lives in unit number twenty-seven, on the second floor," Kassem said, pointing to the building. "Let's go."

Doerr climbed up the stairs, accompanied by the others. They took a right after coming out of the stairwell and walked through the veranda-style hallway. A man came out of one of the flats. As soon as he saw the policemen, he disappeared swiftly back inside his flat. Doerr knew that in this part of the world, people were more afraid of cops than they were of criminals.

Doerr and the others were soon at the door of flat number twenty-seven. Doerr knocked. No response.

Kassem moved forward, knocked on the door hard, and then he kicked it. The door shook, but it did not break.
Doerr kicked the door, and it cracked open.
It was a two-bedroom flat with a modest living room that had a couple of chairs and a TV. The lights were off. Doerr and Kassem checked the bedrooms – nobody there.
Kassem knocked on the next few doors and talked to the occupants in their native tongue. Doerr did not understand what was being said, but he could figure out that the news was not good.
"It appears Ahmad and his family left their flat yesterday, without telling anything to anyone." Kassem turned to Doerr after he finished talking to the neighbors. "It was very unlike them, the man says. This guy was Ahmad's buddy, it seems. Ahmad always told him what was going on in his family. This time – nothing. He says Ahmad is not coming back."
"What makes this buddy so sure that Ahmad will not return?" Doerr asked.
"He left with five large suitcases and took all of his family with him. And they didn't tell anything to anyone."
"But why did he leave?" Doerr asked Kassem. "Is Ahmad scared of our agency or you guys?"
"I don't think Ahmad left because he was afraid of the CIA or me or my guys." Kassem folded his arms over his chest, and the three Emirate policemen gathered behind him. "He left because he was scared of Halim."
"What do you mean?" Doerr asked.
"I mean Ahmad ran because he knew what Halim would do to him once he figured out that he had given you secrets. Halim would kill him." Kassem paused. "How did you make Ahmad talk to you, anyway?"
"That's not important," Doerr said. "What is important is to find him…can you find him?"
"We will try. But I'm afraid the bastard might have left the country."

FAIZAN WAS DROPPED at the professor's house in Augusta, Georgia, at around eight in the evening. He got out of the car with his duffel bag in one hand and the black briefcase in the other. The wind was chilly, and he was dog-tired. He trudged along the walkway, made with slabs of stones, to the main door of the professor's house.

Faizan approached the door, and a light outside went on. He rang the bell and waited.
The door opened, and a burly man appeared in white pajamas.
“Are you Faizan?” the man asked.
Faizan nodded, and the man extended his hand for a shake. “We have been expecting you, Faizan. I am Hassan. Please, come in.”
“Are you the professor?” Faizan asked, just making sure he came to the right place. Hassan was clean shaven, and Faizan estimated him to be about forty-five years old. He had a healthy figure, except for a bulge around his middle.
“Yes, young man. Come in, please.”
Faizan stepped in and stood in the middle of the living room. An expensive-looking leather sofa and a loveseat sat opposite the TV. There was a large bookshelf next to the TV.
“Let me show you your room,” Hassan said and walked toward the carpet-covered stairs. “Give me that big bag. I will carry it for you.”
“It’s okay.” Faizan pulled his duffel bag closer to him, as if Hassan were going to snatch it. “I can manage it.”
Hassan turned and walked up the stairs; Faizan followed. Hassan led him to a room on the second floor and opened the door.
“This is where you can stay for a few days.” Hassan pointed inside the room. “I know you are tired, but I want you to meet my family. So, please freshen up and join us for dinner.”
“Okay.” Faizan was tired and yearned for a long nap. He had spent the last forty-eight hours in vehicles. The last leg of his journey had been smoother than the first two, but it was very taxing. He certainly did not want to make small talk at a dinner table with people he never met before, did not care about, and surely would not meet again – he would be dead in just a few days and would be with his seventy-five virgins, if the mullahs were to be believed.
But, due to the circumstances, Faizan decided to oblige his host.
Five minutes later, Faizan dragged himself downstairs and sat at the dinner table, across from Hassan. On the shiny surface of the deep brown varnished wood, Faizan could see the reflection of the six light bulbs hanging from the crystal chandelier above.
Faizan thought the man in front of him was stupid. *Servant of America*.

He looked at Hassan, and their eyes met. Faizan looked away, unable to withstand the frosty gaze of the other man.

Soon the man's wife and his seventeen-year-old daughter joined them at the table. Hassan introduced them to Faizan.

"Hello," Faizan said politely to Hassan's wife and picked up his glass, drinking a few sips of water.

"Faizan was accepted at Georgetown University," Hassan said with a smile. He turned to his daughter. "See, Zarin, Faizan graduated with honors in Computer Science."

Zarin giggled and said, "I'm studying computers too…at my school." She wore glasses with a thick plastic frame and a silver necklace half hidden by her T-shirt. Her hair was reddish, obviously dyed.

Hassan shook his head. "It's not the same. It is as if you are learning the ABCs, whereas Faizan is an expert." Turning to Faizan, he said, "Tell her what your project was on."

The man's wife, short and fat, so far busy bringing the food from the oven to the table, said, "Ahh, don't talk about serious matters now. Let us enjoy dinner. I made goat curry." She turned to Faizan. "I hope you like it."

Faizan nodded.

"Faizan, sit with her later." Hassan jerked his head toward his daughter. "Teach her a few things before you leave."

"I will, don't worry," said Faizan and focused on the food. He looked at the professor's daughter. First he felt an attraction, but then the feeling turned to disdain. *She certainly needs some lessons.* To Faizan, her dress of white shorts and a pink T-shirt was inappropriate. She had no respect for the elders. She was eating in front of seniors and giggling at the same time. *She has to be taught a few things, here. No, she needs to be taken to Mecca and trained properly.*

Faizan took the white rice and some goat curry from the bowl and placed them on his white porcelain plate. As he started mixing them with his bare hands, the dirty look from the young girl did not evade his notice.

"Faizan will be here for four more days," Hassan said.

"Three," Faizan corrected Hassan.

Turning to his daughter, Hassan said, "Show him around the town if you have some time."

"Okay," she said and turned her attention to the smartphone in her hand, smiling after reading whatever she was looking at.

After dinner was finished, Faizan went back upstairs to his room, sat on the bed, and took his shirt off.
He opened the red duffel bag, where all the parts of his two AK-74 rifles were stored; everything was still there. He opened the black briefcase – the cash, his passport, and the handguns were intact. Halim's instruction was to throw away the passport after entering the US, so that if he was caught somehow, they wouldn't be able to identify him.
Keep the passport for now, he told himself and locked the briefcase. He sealed the duffel with a small lock and key, put the key in his shorts pocket, and then jumped into the bed.
The next morning he woke up to the soft sunlight that came in through the white window drapes. He rubbed his eyes and wondered where exactly he was. Within seconds, he recollected everything that had happened during the last few days. The flight to Mexico City, the long ride to Nuevo Laredo, the chicken tacos at the restaurant on the way, the dark night ride across the river on the makeshift boat and finally the car ride to the professor's house. It had been a long and laborious trip so far but successful. The next phase would be long too and even more strenuous – he would have to drive and do other fatiguing work and then make the ultimate sacrifice.
He closed his eyes, hoping to catch some more much-needed sleep.

CHAPTER 20

Doerr called Louder for updates; there was good and bad news. Egyptian authorities located two of the men named Faizan, whose visas had been rejected recently in Egypt. But the bad news was that Louder still refused to issue the APBs for the remaining three Faizans.

Louder needed definitive proof. “I have been burned before by issuing too many too soon, Doerr. I’m not doing it this time.” Louder’s voice was firm, and it had a tone of finality to it.

Doerr knew he would not be able to change Louder’s mind, so he hung up and thought for a while. He liked to do things himself, but this was an exceptional situation. He hated it, but he had no choice and had to call Lazarus to get some help from the top.

Doerr made the call, and Lazarus picked up after three rings. “I heard you made some good progress. Good job, Max.”

“Yes. I got a name. His name is Faizan. We know who he is. The only problem is there are a couple of guys with that name, but we have their photos.”

“Yes, I know. I read your report. What do you need me to do?”

“Well,” Doerr said. “The FBI guy, Louder, is refusing to issue the APBs, and I need some help on that.”

“FBI, huh?” Lazarus said sarcastically. “When do they listen to us?”

“We need to spread the info and be on the lookout for this man. In this case, it will be all three guys.”

“Okay. I will sort it out. If needed, I will get Director Stonewall involved. Anything else?”

“Yes. If and when Faizan is located in America, I want Rosania and me to be flown in immediately, and he should be handed to us.”

“That might be a problem. As you know, any domestic terrorism matter will be handled by the FBI.”

“But this case originated abroad,” Doerr said with desperation. “So it belongs to the CIA.”

“Max, let’s not jump the gun too soon. I will see what I can do if and when this Faizan guy is caught.”

FAIZAN SLEPT THROUGH most of the first two days of his stay at the professor's house.

Jet lag, he thought. Until that point, other than entering the country illegally, Faizan knew he had not done anything illegal. But on the third day, that would change.

He woke up early. He slid out of the bed. Before doing anything else, he put his knees on the floor and prayed for twenty minutes. *Let the fruit of all hard work ripen, and I be able to deliver the message to the Great Satan*. Faizan prayed. *For the rest of the world, let me be known as the disciple who carried out the Almighty's wish.*

Shortly after, Faizan lazily descended the stairs and stood in the living room. He could sense that the professor had already left for work. The professor's wife was doing something in the kitchen in a hurried manner. She wore a pair of black pants and a blue shirt. Faizan knew she was about to head out for work.

"This is what we have today." The wife placed a white plate on the dinner table. It had four pieces of toast on it, and then she heated up a cup of coffee in the microwave, placing it next to the white plate.

"That's more the than enough," said Faizan and threw her a big smile.

"If you need anything, ask Zarin, please," she said, jerking her head upward, indicating that Zarin was in her room upstairs, and then she exited through the door.

Faizan smiled to himself and sat down to enjoy the meal, which he decided would be his last one in the house. The coffee was stale, and he cursed the professor's wife silently. *She did not have the courtesy to attend to a guest's comfort. She is no Muslim.*

He lifted the second piece of toast to his mouth and heard soft footsteps – Zarin.

"Morning," she said and headed for the kitchen. She opened the fridge, looking for something for breakfast.

"Morning," he replied and looked at her rear end. *If she were a bit more religious, then she would be a good wife for me,* Faizan thought. But immediately, he chided himself for thinking about the worldly things.

"I will take you to the museum today," she said as she put her coffee cup in the microwave.

"Don't bother. I'm not in the mood. Feeling tired today. I will go back to bed after this." He pointed to his plate.

“Okay.” She took the coffee and headed upstairs.
Faizan finished his toast and took a last sip from his coffee cup, and then he walked out of the house and stood at the front door and took a deep breath. It was a beautiful place; there was no denying that. The street was lined by huge houses, and each house was endowed with large front and back yards. The asphalt on the road was deep black. Faizan knew that a house in this sort of place in Cairo would cost a fortune. He sighed and returned back inside the house and started up the stairs that led to his bedroom.
“Faizan,” Zarin said from behind him, which almost startled him.
He was on the second or third step of the stairs. He turned and figured that she was sitting at the dining table.
“Yes?” he said. “Don’t you have school today?” The light bulbs in the chandelier were turned off, but the area was well lit with sunlight that penetrated through the large glass windows.
“No, it’s a school holiday. Why don’t we go outside? It’s a beautiful day. Dad asked me to show you around, but you have been sleeping last two days.”
“No,” he said as he turned and walked toward her. “I don’t want to go out. I’m not feeling well.”
“Oh, come on! You will be just sitting in the car,” Zarin said and paused and then asked awkwardly, “Do you they have cars in Egypt?”
“Yes, we do. In fact, we have the same exact cars as you do here. Toyota Camry, Honda…I have a bad headache. Can you get me some medicine?” he lied, hoping that would send her out of the house, giving him some privacy.
“Oh, no problem,” she said and went upstairs and came back within a minute with some pills in her hand. “Here, take these. It will help you.”
Faizan took the two blue gel pills and said, “Thanks.” Then he headed back to his room.
Once in his room, he locked the door, threw the pills outside through the window, looked outside and prayed again.
After he’d been done praying, he started packing his stuff. First he took the AK-74 rifle parts from the duffel bag, and one by one, he put them together and finally clamped the barrel on. He had done it many times during his training. He aimed the rifle through the window, gave it a shake and felt it was assembled correctly. He laid it to rest on the floor by the wall and then proceeded with the second rifle.

Next, he took the two handguns out of the briefcase and loaded them. He checked the cash again and was about to put on clothes when he heard a knock on the door.
It was Zarin. Faizan hurried to the door.
“I came back to check.” She peeped through the door which was only slightly opened by Faizan. “Are you okay?”
“Yes, yes,” he said and paused, still holding the door almost shut, thinking hard of a better idea to get rid of her. “Actually, you know, I’m having a loose bowel problem. I’m not used to this American food. Do you have any medicine for that?”
Zarin smiled and lowered her head. “I think we do. Let me check.” She left. Faizan closed the door, and his vision fell on the two rifles lying near the wall. He quickly shoved them in the duffel bag; only the tips of the rifles’ barrels could be seen from outside. Within a minute, Zarin was back again, and Faizan opened the door slightly.
“I think we don’t have any Imodium. Mom might keep it somewhere else. I don’t know,” she smilingly said. “But don’t worry, I will go and get some for you. Okay?”
“Okay.” He shut the door again and, a minute later, watched Zarin leave in her red Ford car. He was relieved. She was finally gone. He undressed and stuffed the clothes inside the duffel bag and put on fresh ones. He tried to push the tips of the AK-74s inside the bag, but a few inches of the barrel still hung outside.
He knew he did not have much time. Zarin could be back any minute. He picked up the duffel bag with his right hand and the black briefcase with the left. He knew where the key to the professor’s Dodge Caravan was – hanging from a hook on the hallway. After picking up the key, he laid the little note on the kitchen counter – *Dear Mr. Hassan, a friend just called me. He wanted to meet me in Atlanta. Don’t worry, and please don’t call the police. I will be back tomorrow. Your car is safe with me.*
None of that was true. But he was happy that the girl was gone and he didn’t need to kill her. Halim’s instruction was clear – kill anyone who stood in the way. Be it the girl, her father, or the entire family. “Of course that would start a manhunt,” Halim had said. “But cops in America are overrated; they won’t be able to get to you within twenty-four hours. I have chosen the Augusta location for a reason. After you leave the professor’s

house, you cross into a new state within minutes. Cops in different states don't talk to one another, let alone cooperate to catch someone."
Faizan exited through the door. He had his duffel bag and the briefcase. He took two steps and froze. Zarin's compact car appeared in front of the driveway and took a slow right turn into it.

CIA DIRECTOR STONEWALL was running through all the meetings she was going to attend that day; it was a long list. She took a sip from her large cup of coffee and then placed it back on the table. She had been prepping for her meetings for an hour already, and it was only eight thirty in the morning.
At nine sharp, she started the staff meeting. Lazarus was there, and she introduced three newly hired field officers – two men and one woman, all of them in their mid-twenties.
"Remember," she continued her speech, "our job is not just to do what your supervisor tells you to do. We are responsible to the American people. Keeping our great country safe is what we do. Our country depends on us. We take risks, and we put our lives on the line. Harbor no regret that you cannot tell your friends about all that you do. Have no sadness that you don't appear in newspapers or on TV or Internet sites. You are the true hero. I know that. And the president knows that."
All two hundred people, who had gathered to listen to Stonewall, applauded. Stonewall spoke for another thirty minutes. And then it was time for her next meeting, which was with the French Intelligence. It was going to be a video conference call, and Lazarus was going to be joining her.
Stonewall walked down the hallway, heading for her office, Lazarus sauntering alongside her.
"We have some credible info that there is going to be an attack on a French university," Stonewall said without looking at Lazarus. "But we don't know where."
"Do we know who is going to do it?" Lazarus asked, clearing his throat.
"The source said two Algerian men are already in France. But what we don't know is who sent them. Al-Qaeda and the Iranians are the prime suspects. But either way we have to warn the French."
"Why don't we ask them to do something for us before we tell them?" Lazarus said as they both entered Stonewall's office and sat down.

“I think that’s a good idea,” Stonewall started entering the conference number into the Cisco video phone, “but I don’t know what they can pass on to us that is valuable.”
“I think they can give us a tape of those conversations over land phones from France to Pakistan, to Saudi Arabia, to Syria. And copies of those physical mails sent to mullahs in Paris that the French intel regularly…”
Stonewall shushed Lazarus. The meeting was on. Three decorated French generals and two French plainclothes men appeared on the video display.
“*Bonjour*,” one of the generals said.
“*Bonjour*,” replied Stonewall. A few minutes passed in exchanging pleasantries before Stonewall broached the real topic at hand. “We have some info about an attack in your country.”
“Let’s hear it,” the second French general said.
“Not so fast,” said Lazarus.
Stonewall said to Lazarus in a hushed voice, “Let me handle it. You just listen in.”
“We think we should receive something in return from you,” Stonewall said loudly into the phone, “after we give you the information.”
“What do you mean?” the second general said. “You tell us what you know, and we tell you what we know. I thought that’s the deal we have.”
“Frankly speaking,” Stonewall said, grinning. “Lately we have been giving a lot of data, and in return, we don’t receive much.”
The general sat up straight and said, “If you want to keep the information to yourself, then keep it, but we will not be coerced into something that we don’t want to do.”
“Listen, all we are asking for is something in return for what I am about to tell you. This is very valuable information from a reliable source.”
“We all know,” the first general with a big mustache, who had been seated silently and reading from a folder since the pleasantries, cut in, “how reliable the CIA intelligence data is. You fought in Iraq for almost a decade and spent two trillion dollars based on faulty intelligence. So don’t tell us your information is *valuable*. Maybe we are better off without whatever it is that you know.”
Stonewall sighed and dropped her shoulders. “We *are* going to tell you what we know, as I can’t sit and watch innocent people die anywhere in the world. We are also going to send you a list of items we expect you to send.

If we don't receive those within a reasonable timeframe, then we will no longer have these meetings."
Lazarus gleefully nodded, and the meeting was over fifteen minutes later.
Stonewall's next meeting was outside the Langley office, in the Hyatt Hotel in DC. It was to be a lunch gathering, hosted by a lobbyist who had the largest office in K Street. Stonewall generally avoided such lavish gatherings, and the only reason she had decided to attend was because she knew that the eight Senate Intelligence Committee members, including the chairman and Senator Brushback, were also going to be present. She hated that she would have to see Senator Brushback face to face, but she still decided to go, since she knew that the best time to get a politician to promise to do some real work was when their belly was full of old wine and fresh caviar.

A LIMO WITH dark-tinted windows picked up Stonewall from the Langley office and dropped her at the Hyatt Hotel.
At the lunch, Stonewall talked to the chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee and avoided eye contact with Brushback. Later, heading back to the lunch room after a trip to the restroom, Stonewall saw Brushback walking toward her. She looked at the dragon decoration on the wall and tried to pass him without making conversation, but the senator stood in front of her. "Hello, Director Stonewall, it's so nice to see you," Brushback greeted her insincerely.
Stonewall turned her face and tried to look surprised. "Hi. I didn't know you were going to be here," she lied.
After more smooth talking, Brushback asked, "Have you decided who the deputy director will be once Lazarus leaves?"
"I have been thinking about that a lot. But the agency has so many good candidates, and I have not been able to make up my mind."
"As I was saying the other day," Brushback clasped his hands together and grinned, "Ross Calpone will make a good deputy director, and I think you should consider him for the job. Even Lazarus thinks so."
"I think we already settled that. Ross Calpone will not be the deputy director as long as I am sitting on the top spot."
Brushback took a step back and said, "The FBI director called me and said that Max Doerr has been calling one of his men, asking for undue favors."

“Undue favors?” Stonewall said angrily. “Max is just doing his job. We government agencies cooperate and coordinate, unlike you politicians, who can’t stop biting each other.”
“Mind your language, Stonewall,” Brushback warned her. “I talked to people in your agency, and many don’t like your style. How come you have a foreigner named Regina Rosania working on the high-profile Dubai operation? I demand that Rosania be taken off the Dubai project immediately.”
Stonewall paid no heed. “First, I don’t think that the FBI director called you. Second, I am the director, and I will run operations my way. Third, Rosania, my agent, will not be taken off the project. Now, if you will excuse me.” Stonewall started walking away from the senator.
“Wait,” the senator said desperately. “What about oversight? I have a constitutional duty.”
“What about it?” Stonewall faced Brushback, all traces of smile gone from her face. “We sent you all the reports. See it over and over.”
“Just sending a report isn’t enough.” Brushback kicked the carpeted floor out of frustration.
“It *is* enough. And one more thing. You will not talk to anyone in my agency but me. And if you don’t oblige, I will take it up with the president.” She started walking away from the senator. She was done with Brushback.
Stonewall wondered how Senator Brushback knew so much about the Dubai operation. Was it possible that Lazarus was feeding him all the data? Then she brushed the thought aside. Lazarus had been working for the agency for a really long time, and she had nothing but confidence in him.

DOERR FELT RELIEVED that the three APBs had been issued for the three men whose first name was Faizan. Their photos and other details had been distributed to every law enforcement agencies across America. If any of the men were caught by police for a minor traffic infraction or any other incident, the man in question would be detained, and the Counter Terrorism Department of the FBI would be notified. With some luck, the FBI and the CIA would work together and elicit all the information they needed, or so Doerr hoped.
But for that to happen, Doerr knew, a lot of things had to go right. The best way to solve the problem was to somehow catch Halim. But he was not

having much success with that either. The CIA's 'Eyes in the Skies' program, which was basically a worldwide listening system implemented with satellites, intercepted communications from Halim that supported the theory that someone named Faizan was in America already and was planning a major attack. But the source of that communication was not clearly identified, and some within the CIA doubted whether that intercept was even credible. It may be just some renegade terrorist group trying to spread rumors that were not backed by fact.

Doerr did everything he could to locate Halim. He and Rosania interviewed close to a hundred people who were said to be associated with terrorist groups. In the process, Doerr hired about twenty of them to be CIA informants. The information they provided was vital, but Halim seemed to have just vanished from the face of the Earth.

Doerr called his wife, Gayle, one day. "How is your job?"

"It's hectic right now," Gayle said. "We are releasing new a version of software in March."

"So you're working late pretty much every day?"

"Yes. More or less. And I will be working this weekend."

"So it looks like you are better off without me at the moment," Doerr said and laughed.

"Max, please don't joke." Gayle's voice turned serious. "As it is, I'm already tense, and I wonder all the time whether you will come back in one piece or not."

"I'm sorry." Doerr paused.

A few seconds later, Gayle asked, "How is your work?"

"Well…we have been trying to catch this guy. I cannot say his name over phone. But he is like the father of all terrorists. No one knows where he is. But it looks like he has either already sent a man to America or is about to send him there. And my gut is telling me that this man is already on American soil."

"Oh, really? He is in America already? About to plant a bomb or something? Where in America?"

"My guess is he is heading for either New York or DC. But then, as some of my co-workers at Langley suggested, this whole thing may be conjecture, completely fictitious. There is no man and no attack plan, according to them. But a voice inside me says they are planning to attack us, and we aren't doing enough to stop it."

“When is this operation going to end? Wasn’t catching Samuel your real job?”
“I guess this operation will end when we find these men. But yes, Samuel is on my mind all the time. The only reason I came to Dubai is because Lazarus made it a condition that I do this job before I could pursue Samuel. I agree with what he said. First this man, then Samuel. But I still feel like Samuel is sitting on my chest, always mocking me. I can almost hear Billy saying, ‘Daddy, go and catch Samuel.’ I go through this cycle every day!”
“I don’t know what to say, Max. I only hope that you do the right thing, live with me the rest of your life and walk every day with your head high.”

ZARIN’S CAR STOPPED just a foot away from Faizan. He dropped his bag and the briefcase on the ground, his mouth agape. He had expected her to be back soon but not that soon.
Zarin got out of her car, holding up a small yellow plastic pouch, probably with medicine inside. “See, I got it. But where are you going, Faizan?”
He quickly positioned himself so that Zarin wouldn’t be able to see the tips of his rifles popping out of his bag. He now regretted that he had assembled the rifles; it could have been done later. “I was going out to get the medicine myself. After I saw you were taking a long time.” He knew it sounded lame, but that was the best he could come up with.
“I was gone,” Zarin glanced at her watch, “not even ten minutes. And why are you carrying those bags? Come inside and take these meds.” She jerked her hand, motioning for him to reenter the house.
Faizan turned, ready to go back in the house. He gave a wry smile and said, “In America, time seems to pass slowly.”
That is a little better, he thought. Faizan felt good, and then he remembered the note he had left for the professor. He went straight to the kitchen, crumpled the paper and put it in his pocket, and helped himself to a glass of water. Faizan felt better; one problem was gone, but now a bigger problem stood before him.
How would Faizan leave with the professor’s car without rattling Zarin?
He took the pills from Zarin. “I am going upstairs for some rest. I hope this medicine works.” Faizan stepped on the stairs. It was also a lie. He was going to hatch another plan. Throw away the pills, pray again, and then

utilize his bright brain to come out of this situation with minimal damage – that was Faizan's new plan.
After the prayers, Faizan thought option one was just take the key and run. The problem with that would be if they called the cops, then they would chase Faizan.
Option two would be to convince Zarin to come with him, and Faizan knew the chance of that happening was very low.
Option three was the one Halim had said he should take. *Kill whoever stands in the way.*
He thought over and over. *Option one, two or three.*
Yes, he made a decision – option three. He was going to execute option three, which was to kill the girl, then take the key and run. Her mom and dad would come home in the evening, but by then, he would be long gone.
He stood up. Opening his briefcase, he took out a handgun and screwed the silencer to the barrel. He did not have much time to waste. He went straight to Zarin's room and knocked. No response. He knocked again. Zarin opened the door and pushed her hair from her forehead. She wore a pair of blue jeans and a black T-shirt; she must have done something to her eyelashes earlier in the day, and her face was smooth—like a clear sky – no acne, not a single pimple. With his gun-holding hand tucked behind him, he realized her face looked beautiful to him.
"What? Feeling better?" Zarin smiled, and her brace-covered teeth could be seen.
Now. Faizan placed his finger on the trigger and was ready to shoot.
"Zarin, what's that at the window?" Faizan said and pointed to the window in her room.
"What?" Zarin turned her head.
Faizan raised his gun and pointed at her head. There was no hesitation, no second thought. No compassion, and there was no feeling of guilt in his mind. He had to do it; Halim had said he had to do it – kill a Muslim, when needed.
Faizan pulled the trigger. The young girl's body dropped to the floor. Blood oozed from the neat hole in her head. Faizan put a few items of clothing under her head so the blood would not seep into the carpet. He entered her room, looking for a large suitcase, but he couldn't find one. He found a *niqab*; he picked it up and tucked it in his pocket.

He searched the entire house. Five minutes later, he discovered a large suitcase in one of the closets. He laid it down on the carpet in Zarin's room. He didn't have much time. The blood flow from her head had slowed to a lazy trickle. He wrapped her head with a piece of cloth and then put the *niqab* over her face.

Faizan dragged Zarin's dead body near the bed in her room and tried to fit her into the suitcase, but the suitcase was too small. He thought of chopping the body into pieces, to make it fit, but after several tries he managed to cram the body into the suitcase.

Faizan sighed, not due to the sadness of killing but from exhaustion. He wiped the sweat droplets from his forehead. He took one last look at the dead girl's crumpled body in the suitcase before closing the lid.

He tried to lift the suitcase, but it was too heavy, so he pulled it down the stairs. He opened the door and looked outside to make sure no one was around, and there was nobody. He dragged the suitcase and put it inside the professor's van as quickly as he could. He chose the van over Zarin's car because he knew he would be loading bomb-making items soon.

He went back inside the house and then straight to the kitchen, collecting things to clean the traces of blood from Zarin's room. He took his things downstairs and wrote a new note, all in capital letters – MOM, DAD, I AM GOING AWAY WITH FAIZAN FOR TWO DAYS, TO SHOW HIM AROUND. DON'T WORRY. I WILL BE BACK. LOVE, ZARIN.

Faizan put his bag and briefcase inside the van and climbed into the vehicle. He cranked on the ignition and backed out of the driveway. As he switched the transmission from reverse to D, he saw two birds fly by the windshield.

"Action begins now," he muttered. He pushed on the gas pedal, and within ten minutes, he was driving on Interstate 20 East. He drove the first ten miles slowly and carefully, holding the steering wheel with both hands, his eyes fixed on the road in front.

But as he drove, he relaxed and pressed the gas pedal further down; he loved the speed. The highway was lined on both sides by the oak and maple trees that had shed their leaves due to winter temperatures. A black pickup suddenly pulled in front of him, forcing him to slow down, and he cursed at the driver. He saw the blue board that said 'Welcome to South Carolina.' Shifting lanes, he pushed the gas pedal again; the speedometer touched seventy-five. He mentally calculated that he was driving at one hundred and twenty kilometers an hour. It was way faster than the hundred kilometers

speed limit on the Desert Highway in Egypt. He got a thrill knowing that he had never moved so fast in his life, if he didn't count flying.
He crossed a speed sign and slowed to a steady sixty. He looked at the fuel gauge; it held at slightly below the halfway mark.
An hour later, after passing Columbia, when the traffic thinned out, he took an exit. He saw three people walking into the McDonald's restaurant across the street. For the first time, he felt lonely. In Mexico, he had been accompanied by those odd-looking guys, and at the professor's house he had never been alone, and now he was accompanied by a dead body in the suitcase that lay in the back of the van. He looked behind, just to make sure blood was not seeping out of the suitcase. It was not. He let out a sigh of relief; he knew he had to get rid of that body soon.
Passing the McDonald's, he could see the sign for a Shell gas station. Soon, he entered the gas station and saw a guy in khaki shorts pumping gas.
Is he a lunatic? Faizan thought. *It must be below ten degrees Celsius*.
As Faizan pulled up right behind the man's car, the man gave him a curt look. Faizan reached into his briefcase on the passenger seat and discreetly pulled out the loaded 9mm. He opened the door and carefully put the gun in his right pocket and pulled his shirt down to cover the bulge. He walked to his vehicle's fuel cap, his eyes fixed on the ground to avoid the man's gaze. He inserted the gas hose into the tank and pulled the lever. He listened to the bubbling noise of gasoline running through the pipe. He wondered if the professor or his wife were back at the house and, if so, whether they would call the police right away. Faizan knew that even if they called the cops, the cops would do nothing for the next twenty-four hours. By then his job would be complete, and he would be dead and spending time with the virgins in heaven.
The gasoline continued to flow with a hissing noise. He could tell that the tank was nearly full. Faizan chuckled with satisfaction. Just then, he saw a white police car pull into the gas station. A feeling of panic spread through his body, but then he calmed down. Faizan knew that the cops in South Carolina had no reason to come after him. He took a deep breath and tried to look normal.
"The cops in most of rural America are stupid," Halim had said. "And their stupidity is only exceeded by their arrogance. They know nothing about crime and simply sip their coffee in the morning, roam around harassing people or simply sit on their fat asses, hanging up their uniforms and

holsters in the evening and collecting their overpaid salaries every two weeks. You know many American citizens there are in favor of eliminating the police force altogether."

Halim, the wise man, had seemed to know a lot about America, though he had never set foot in the country, despite having a valid American visa on his passport.

Faizan heard a click, and the bubbling noise of flowing gas stopped. He knew his tank was full.

What if I just drive away without paying?

But then he decided against it.

He walked inside the shop, picked up two Snickers bars and a bottle of Coke, and then paid with cash. He returned to his vehicle, and within minutes, he was driving on the highway, again at sixty miles an hour.

Tomorrow would be the last day of his life. He was not scared. He could visualize an erect stone somewhere. Faizan Al-Sourie. June 13, 1989 to February 22, 2012, written on it. The question in his mind was how many of those stones would be erected throughout Muslim land? One? A few? A few hundred or thousands? There was no way for him to know.

CHAPTER 21

Professor Hassan was taking his last paleontology class of the day.
“Look at the picture of Sinosauropteryx, also known as Dino-bird,” the professor said as he pointed his laser pen at the image on the whiteboard. “Its fossil was discovered in China’s Liaoning quarry.”
The professor turned his head to face the students to make sure everyone was listening to him. “Who can tell me in which year the fossil was discovered?”
Five or six hands went up.
“John,” the professor said.
“1975.”
“Incorrect.” The professor felt a vibration in the chest pocket of his white shirt. He took the cell phone out. Seeing that it was his wife, he hit a button to send the call to voicemail. “Okay, Cindy, go.”
“1997.”
“Correct. Let’s take a break for five minutes.”
The professor walked out of the classroom and held the phone to his ear for the voice message. His face became clouded as the message played, and he immediately hit the callback button.
“Hello,” his wife said. “Something terrible has happened. Zarin is gone, and there is this note from her that says she is going away with Faizan!”
“What? What does the note say exactly?”
“Hold on.” There was a pause on the line. “It says ‘Mom, Dad, I am going away with Faizan for two days, to show him around. Don’t worry. I will be back. Love, Zarin.”
“Is it her handwriting?” the professor asked.
“It’s hard to say. It’s written all in caps. I’m so scared right now. It is so unlike her. I called her number, but her cell phone is in her room. Why did you tell her to show Faizan around? Please, come home right now. I’m so scared.”
“Okay, I’m coming.” A shiver ran down the professor’s legs. He knew Zarin never left home without her phone.
After telling the students that the class was over early, he rushed to the parking lot and drove his Honda Accord home like a robot. A few weeks back he had received a speeding ticket, which he thought had been more because of his race and the color of his skin than the velocity of his vehicle.

Since then he had been driving at fifty-eight miles an hour only, but now he didn't care; he floored the gas pedal.

AFTER A LITTLE debate, the professor and his wife went to the local police station and reported their daughter's disappearance. The middle-aged officer took the details, then bluntly said, "We have to wait at least twenty-four hours before any search can begin. How old did you say your daughter is?"
"Seventeen," the professor answered.
"Okay. After twenty-four hours, when we find the man, we can charge him with kidnapping a minor. But right now, I can't do much."
"Can't you search for them anyway?" the professor's wife said, crying.
"We will do everything we can," the officer assured her, "*after* twenty-four hours. There really isn't anything we can do right now. Just wait."
Dejected, the professor and his wife left the police station and returned home to wait.

IN HIS REARVIEW mirror, Faizan could see the sun drowning in an orange horizon. He had been driving for hours since fueling. He needed gas again, needed to stretch his legs, needed to find a cell phone that he could dial an international number with. He needed a lot of things.
He pushed the gas pedal, passed a slower sedan, and switched from the left lane to the second, and watched the long silhouette of his vehicle. He passed a few more exits and then got off the highway and drove to a gas station. It was almost dark, and the light at the Exxon gas station barely lit the area.
Just like the last time, he proceeded to fill his tank, but as he pushed the lever of the gas hose, fuel didn't flow. Then he saw notice on top of the price – if paying cash, pay first. He put the tube back and entered the shop to pay.
"I need gas," Faizan said as he put his hand inside his pocket to pull out the dollar bills.
"What's the number?" the short woman at the register asked.
Faizan frowned, not knowing what she was asking for. The woman peeked outside and pressed a button, and then said, "Okay, go ahead. Come back

here to pay."
Faizan walked back to his vehicle and started fueling. He saw the number three written in black and white at the pump. He understood what number the woman had been asking for. After the fueling was complete, he again had an urge to drive away without paying, and again he decided against it. He went back to pay.
"Where can I find a RadioShack store?" Faizan asked the woman while handing over a hundred-dollar bill.
"RadioShack…hmm, let's see." The woman looked up at the ceiling as if the directions were written there.
"You take a left outta here," the woman said as she returned his change. "Then go about five miles, take a right on 560. Two miles down you'll see a sign for Neumann Mall. Then follow the signs. What are you looking for?"
"I am looking for," he almost said cell phone but realized it was better to say something else. "I am looking for a TV."
"Oh, then better go to BestBuy. It's right outside the mall."
"Okay, thanks," said Faizan and turned to the door.
"Good night," the woman said. "Remember, Neumann Mall."
Faizan walked out without saying anything. He was finding driving on American roads and running through American shops to be so easy. His training in Somalia was surely a factor, but Faizan thought the main reason for the ease was all those hours he spent watching those DVDs and devouring those books and magazines about American life after he had received the acceptance letters from the universities. At that time, he was sure he was heading for America, at least for a few years, if not more. But the day his visa was rejected by the Satan in the embassy, he burned them all. Eight DVDs, nine books and fourteen magazines – half of them were from the library, but he did not care. Everything had gone into the flames. It was his way of protesting.
Faizan drove out of the Exxon gas station and took a left. After around four and a half miles, he saw the sign for Route 560. He took a right at the next junction and saw a car sitting at the side of the road, with its lights flashing. It reminded him that he was supposed to change the license plates, and he cursed himself.
Once the other car disappeared from the rearview mirror, he pulled over and reached inside the briefcase and pulled out the license plate from one of its

pockets. On top of the plate, the word California was written in red, cursive letters.

Armed with a torch and a screwdriver, he headed for the rear end of his van. *Halim is one heck of a planner*, he thought.

He started unscrewing, and the first and second screws came off quickly. But the third one wouldn't budge. He tried for five minutes; his hands became sweaty, and his fingers ached. He gave up. *Darn!*

He decided to ask Halim if changing the plate was that important. He was going to talk to him as soon as he could acquire a cell phone.

He put the two screws on the license plate back and returned to the driver's seat. Ten minutes later, he located the mall and then the RadioShack.

Buying the prepaid phone went smoothly. He insisted to the salesman that he must be able to make an international call with that phone. Halim had told him that he might be asked for ID at RadioShack.

"Should that happen," Halim had told him, "just pretend that you forgot your ID and then look for a second store."

But that wasn't even necessary as the selling clerk rang his purchase through without further comment.

Next, Faizan went to the mall food court and ate until he was full before heading back out to the parking lot. While pulling back to the road, he saw a sign for Home Depot. He tapped his knuckles on his forehead. He had almost forgotten – *the propane tanks*. He needed eight of them to surround the bomb that he would be making very soon. Faizan could almost visualize the bomb going off. And eight propane tanks around it would magnify the mayhem. He could almost hear babies crying, women screaming and see the people fleeing helter-skelter.

He went inside the Home Depot store and picked up four propane tanks and a twenty-five gallon orange plastic gas can and paid with cash. He decided to buy the rest of the propane tanks the next day, sensibly splitting up the purchases to avoid raising suspicion.

He pulled out of the store and followed the same road, going back the way he had come.

Faizan saw the taillight of a car about two hundred feet away. For no apparent reason, Faizan stepped on his brake, and the big suitcase, carrying Zarin's body, rattled. That reminded Faizan that he needed to get rid of the girl's body.

He pushed the gas pedal and picked up speed, peering outside for a suitable place to dump the body. He could only see the trees that lined the road. The car ahead of him disappeared out of view. And Faizan stopped in front of a bush.

He got out of the van and stood there, and he thought he saw something move in the bush. Knowing this area could have bears, raccoons, snakes and other animals, he returned to the vehicle, and then he realized that he would die in less than twenty-four hours. *So why be afraid of anything?* He returned to the front of the bush and decided it was not a good dumping site.

He started driving again. A few miles later, he saw a pond and stopped his van and turned the headlights off. He dragged the suitcase to the edge of the pond and was considering whether to open the suitcase. He knew if he dropped the body into the water, it would sink – at least for now. But if he pushed the luggage into the water, would it go under or would it float?

He was not sure. He thought for a moment about what to do. In the end, he decided to push the suitcase into the water. Taking the body out would take time, and there was that chance that a car could pass by and see him in a precarious situation.

With his foot, he pushed the suitcase a few feet into the water. Its top was sticking out above the water surface. Not because it was not heavy enough, but because the water was not deep enough, Faizan realized. But he did not want to get into the water and get his clothes wet. He looked around and found a sturdy branch, which he used to push the suitcase deeper into the pond, and it disappeared from view. Faizan smiled and returned to his vehicle.

He took the recently bought cell phone out from his chest pocket. It displayed the time – 7:18 p.m., and the four bars on top indicated it had a good signal.

He pulled over and dialed Halim’s number, which he had memorized.

On the second ring, Halim picked up. “Hello.” Halim’s tone told Faizan that he had been waiting for this call.

“Faizan,” Faizan said and paused. “I ate dinner, and now I am taking a walk.” That was the code to say everything was going well, and he was on the way to Washington, DC. If something went wrong, he was supposed to say he threw up, that the food was bad.

“Good, good,” Halim said. “You will go home and light the furnace?” That meant Faizan would go to the house, pick up the explosives and start

making the bomb.
“Yes, yes.” Faizan thought of mentioning the issue with the license plate but decided to say nothing about it. Cops would not be looking for him, and he would die in less than twenty-four hours. Why should he bother? Also, how was Halim going to help about the plate? If he explained the problem to Halim, it might blow the cover on their coded conversation, and most importantly, the old plate didn’t matter as the professor was unlikely to report the stolen car to the cops as he would have a bigger problem to worry about – his missing daughter.
Cops will not be looking for that plate, Faizan thought.
“All right,” Halim said, clearing his throat. “The man is waiting for you with the wood.” That was again another code to say that the man was waiting in his house with a heavy load of firecrackers, from which Faizan would extract the powder to make the explosive.
“Okay, I’m going to continue with my walk,” said Faizan and pressed the red button to end the call before turning the phone off.

SAMUEL HAD BEEN driving up and down the East Coast. Finding a large amount of firecrackers at this time of the year was not easy, but he managed it. He called a few friends and threatened some shop owners. He went from Richmond to DC, from DC to Baltimore, from Baltimore back to Richmond.
He accumulated fifty-six pounds of firecrackers, and then he headed down to the house in Emporia, Virginia.
As soon as he reached the house, he booted up his laptop. Within a minute, he logged on to his bank account and peered at the balance. As expected, the balance amount had popped, and the difference was exactly what had been agreed upon. Halim kept his word, and Samuel would deliver the goods to Halim’s man, who would appear at his doorstep within hours.
“This man will die within twenty-four hours after he picks up the stuff from your place,” Halim had told him, so Samuel did not worry about getting caught in a legal logjam.
He smiled to himself and shut down the laptop and then went outside for a smoke.

FAIZAN YAWNED AND rubbed his eyes, but it was only eight p.m. – jetlag.
A sign at the side of the road said Richmond, Virginia, was still one hundred and twenty miles away. As he drove, he thought he saw the *Malaq Am-Maut*'s face flash in the sky. He knew death was near; he would die in less than twenty-four hours. He was certain that he was headed for Heaven, and his virgins would be waiting.
Figuring it would take more than an hour to reach his destination, he slapped himself on both cheeks and his forehead to try to get rid of his sleepiness. When that was not enough, he took the next exit and filled up the fuel tank and that gas can he had bought at the Home Depot store. When he asked for coffee, the gas station owner was kind enough to brew it fresh for him.
The elderly owner filled the twenty-ounce cup himself. He handed it to Faizan and pointed to the corner and said, “Creamer and sugar over there.”
Faizan poured a load of creamer and plenty of sugar into his cup and then returned to the register. On the way, he picked up a bunch of soda cans, which would be soon used in bomb-making.
“Fifty-six dollars and forty-nine cents,” the elderly man said to Faizan, grinning. “The gas money. Coffee is free.”
Faizan handed him a hundred-dollar bill and took a long sip of his coffee.
“Headed for a long night drive, young man?” the elderly man asked, returning Faizan’s change.
“Yes,” said Faizan awkwardly, taking the money. He left the store promptly.
Back in his vehicle, Faizan entered the address Halim had given him into the GPS. That was where he would pick up the firecrackers. Faizan drank almost half of the coffee quickly and felt much fresher. The GPS showed he needed to drive another seventy miles on Interstate 95 to reach the house.
He went through the plan mentally again and floored the gas pedal.
Directed by the GPS, Faizan reached the house in about an hour. The road was long; outside, it was dark. He lowered the windows and heard a humming noise; he was not sure what it was and where it came from. He rolled the windows up and slowed to a halt in front of a secluded home in rural Virginia. Faizan parked his van on the asphalt-covered driveway, right next to another van.
He got out and proceeded to the door. It was wooden, painted white, protected by a metallic net screen on which several bugs were stuck. A light

bulb at the top kept the area illuminated. Faizan rang the bell and waited. No one came. He rang the bell again, and a few seconds later, a tall man opened the door. He wore a white sweatshirt with a large hood, which covered most of his face. The lights inside were turned off, perhaps on purpose.

“I am Faizan,” Faizan said and extended his hand, expecting a shake. “Are you Sigma?”

The man nodded but did not take Faizan’s hand and asked in a deep voice, “Tell me what you are here for?”

“I am here for fire.” That was the code phrase. Faizan wondered if he had come to the right place, but the doubt lasted only a second.

The man lowered his head. “Come with me.” He stepped outside the door. Faizan saw the man’s face, under the light from the bulb right above the door. He had a distinctive scar on his right cheek.

Sigma continued to walk, and Faizan followed him. Sigma stopped near his van and opened the rear door. Faizan did the same and opened the door to his own vehicle. The boxes were transferred, and the job was complete within minutes. Sigma walked away toward his house without saying anything and closed the door without looking back.

Halim had warned Faizan, “Some Americans talk too much. Don’t engage in unnecessary conversations. If they don’t like what you say, they might kill you on the spot. Every American has a gun tucked in his back pocket. It is a shame that they call their country a civilized one. It’s really a lie.”

Faizan didn’t have to worry about avoiding conversing with the man—the man with a cut on the right cheek – the man left on his own.

Soon, Faizan was back on I-95 North. About thirty minutes later, he saw a sign that read ‘Emporia.’ It was time to look for a place to spend the night and assemble the bomb.

A few miles later, he chose an exit that did not display any sign for a gas station or motel and took a left at the end of the ramp. The road was dark, and he passed a gas station and two shops, all closed. A car crossed from the other side, and he flicked the headlights just for fun.

The plan was to look for an empty house after eleven, but it was only ten forty, so he drove on and took a right turn a few junctions later.

Both sides of the road were lined by trees left naked by the winter. He drove another half a mile but found no house. He was about to turn when he finally saw one. It was a small, two-level house with no vehicle in the

driveway, which was a good sign, so he hit the brakes. As he ventured closer, he could see the white garage door barely lit by a feeble lightbulb. He decided to pass.
“If there is a garage, most likely the car is parked inside and the owner sleeping in the bedroom,” Halim had said. “Look for a house with no car in the driveway and no garage. Sometimes the garage could be at the side of the house, so look carefully. And always remember to have your pistol ready. Be it a man, dog or child, point at the head and pull the trigger.”
“How do you know so much about America?” Faizan had asked his mentor. “You have never been there, right?”
“Right, but I have been working on this plan for last two years. I have some people giving me information as well.”
“What if a bunch of people come out of the house?”
Halim had laughed loudly. “This is the difference between them and us. They like to live solitary lives. At eleven p.m. a house in rural America will only have two occupants. One, if you are lucky.”
“What if the guy comes out with a gun?”
“That is a possibility, son.” Halim’s face had become serious. “That is why you need to do some more training before you leave and show everyone that we are better at everything. Understood?”
Faizan had nodded, and his mentor had continued, “If a man appears with a gun, kill him first. Should there be more people inside, kill everybody, show no mercy. They don’t deserve our mercy. Think about all the Palestine kids they have killed; you will find strength. Think of all the women widowed by the Americans. You will find courage. Allah will put an elephant’s strength and deer’s agility in you.”
“What if an alarm goes off?”
“Well, in rural areas they are unlikely to have alarms. What is the point in having an alarm blare if there is no one around to hear?” Halim had laughed again, and then his face went solemn. “If an alarm does go off, then kill everyone in the house and disable the alarm before leaving. You will be getting some training on alarms, how to disable them and how to re-enable them.”
Passing that house with the white garage door, Faizan appreciated the knowledge and greatness of the Lion of Dubai even more. He passed a few more houses and stopped at one with a long driveway that looked to be ideal. There was no car parked in the driveway, and no garage was visible.

He stopped in the driveway; his van stood about twenty feet away from the door. He stopped the engine and waited.

After five minutes, he opened his briefcase and inserted his hand. He pushed aside the 9mm and took the silenced Beretta, alighted from the vehicle, closed the door as softly as possible, and waited again. One minute passed, and he didn't hear any dog, so he proceeded to the gate. Had there been any barking noise, he would have gotten back into the car and left quietly. He heard the howling of some distant animal, maybe a wolf or a bear. He was not sure; he did not care.

He tiptoed to the door. The walkway was made of white stones, and dry leaves lay strewn around.

There was no light on, inside or outside. After trying to peek inside for a few seconds, he pressed the doorbell and watched his own silhouette on the door against the moonlight, and then he pushed it again. He heard a dog inside but nothing else, and the inside of the house looked pitch dark. He gave the knob a turn with his left hand, still holding the Beretta in the other hand, raised and ready to shoot. The knob did not move, and Faizan waited.

He turned and looked at the moon. Bright and soothing. How many times had he looked at the gracious moon? Too many times, and perhaps this was the last time he would gaze at it.

And then the door opened wide. Faizan turned his head back. A man appeared, and the moonlight glinted off the long double barrel of the rifle in his hand.

CHAPTER 22

Bert and Sandy had been thankful to God for a good retired life in Virginia. Bert had worked at a local USPS office and had retired two years previously. Sandy retired from her middle school teacher job a year ago. They had a son, who was settled in Boston, and a daughter, Janice.

A cloud had fallen on their otherwise happy life when Janice got divorced a few years back. Patrick, their son-in-law, was an asshole.

One day Patrick had come home and told Janice, “I am leaving you.”

Shell-shocked, Janice had asked, “Why? Is it because of something I did?”

“No. I need something more from life. Something that will wow me. I don’t want to live this regular life.”

The next day, Patrick was gone, and Janice had to play both mother and father to their five-year-old son, Harry. Once the divorce was final, she moved from Chicago to Washington, DC, to be closer to her parents.

Janice worked as a paralegal at a prestigious DC law firm that dealt with mostly high-profile murder cases. Despite long hours, Janice was happy with her job, and she was paid an above-average annual salary of sixty-two thousand dollars.

Janice could take a breather as her mom and dad extended helping hands in taking care of her son.

Sandy and Bert regularly went to their daughter’s apartment in Washington to be with Janice and Harry, who was seven by that point. Janice and Harry spent many weekends at Sandy and Bert’s big house. Harry liked the house. He could fly kites; he could hold grandpa’s prized guns, run around outside, and do lots of other things.

Janice liked skiing, one of a very few hobbies she had shared with her ex-husband. When they had been married, they used to go to Canada skiing, at least once a year.

After coming to Washington, DC, she missed skiing sorely. She thought of going to one of those artificial ski places near DC, but she did not have a skiing buddy, and she did not like to ski alone. In fact, she did not like to do anything in life alone.

But soon she met a friend who was into skiing, and together they planned a trip to Canada. Janice thought it would be nice if her mom came along; she knew her father would not come, as he hated traveling.

Sandy agreed to go with her daughter and said to her husband, “You always complain you never get enough time to spend with your grandson. Now is your chance. You and Harry can stay here when we gals go to Canada.”
“That’s fine with me,” Bert had said, “as long as there is enough food in the fridge.”

THAT NIGHT, BERT had been cleaning his guns in the garage, and his grandson, Harry, was playing on his Xbox in the basement. By nine p.m., Bert was done cleaning his two handguns and the rifle; only the shotgun was left, and he decided to clean it the next day.
Bert went to check on Harry, who was sleeping soundly next to the Xbox controller.
Bert looked at Harry’s face; he did not want to wake the little boy. Bert put a pillow under the boy’s head and then a blanket over his legs and torso. He smiled and walked upstairs to the kitchen, fixing himself a sandwich, which he ate and then went to his bedroom. He put his just-cleaned rifle under the bed and patted its double barrel before lying down.
Bert woke up in the middle of the night; he had heard the doorbell ring. He got off the bed and picked up his rifle. He tried to remember if he kept the video surveillance system on, and he was pretty sure he had. He confidently walked downstairs and crossed the living room, and his beloved mutt followed him and sniffed his feet. Bert had acquired the mutt only a year before, but he felt the dog had been with him a lot longer. It accompanied him wherever he went, especially during the night.
He went to the door, opened it wide and pointed the rifle at the man standing in front of him.

WHEN THE DOOR opened, the mutt jumped at Faizan, and its owner looked on. Faizan’s left hand went up and shoved the mutt aside. The mutt fell, right outside the door, but immediately sprang up and bit Faizan’s left arm. But it wasn’t enough to save Bert. As he shoved the mutt, Faizan’s right hand came up, the Beretta leveling at Bert’s head. Faizan’s body tilted back slightly, his vision fixed on the skull of the old man in front of him; he pulled the trigger, just like he had during his training.

Faizan crouched, the dog's teeth still locked on his left arm, which he jerked off to free himself and immediately pointed the Beretta at the old man, who was lying on the floor, looking as if he was dead. The man's head was on the doormat, and blood had started oozing from the hole in his forehead. *No need to spend another bullet on the man*. He turned the gun to the loyal, large, and hairy dog, and pulled the trigger. The dog slumped to the floor. The owner and his pet lay bleeding within a few feet of each other.

It became quiet; Faizan stood still but alert. He looked inside; it was dark. Switching the gun to his left hand, he tried to listen for any sound. There was none. He moved his hand on the wall, trying to find the light switch. After a while, he located it and turned the light on. His eyes swept the area. On the right was a two-piece sofa, in front of the large flat-screen TV, and the kitchen was on the other side. He walked a few steps and saw the stairs leading upstairs, which he quickly ascended. On the second floor, the first room was small and empty. The second one held a bed. He stepped inside but saw no one. He moved to the third room; it was empty too.

There was no time to waste, Faizan knew that. He had a lot of work ahead of him. He rushed down the stairs, dragged the old man's corpse inside the house, pulled in the dead dog by its collar and shut the door. He surveyed the floor, checking out each door, just like he had done during his training in Somalia, and found the entry to the garage. Inside the garage, there was a neatly parked black, polished sedan. Faizan walked to the back of the car. He saw 'Lincoln' written on it.

First he thought he would move the Lincoln out and bring his van in and then unpack the firecrackers into the aluminum cans he had collected. But then he felt pain in his left arm and noticed a little blood oozing from the dog bite. He abandoned the idea of swapping cars.

He went outside and brought in the duffel bag from his van. He took out a bandage and put it over his wound. It did little to relieve the pain, and he worried about getting rabies. But then he chuckled. *Heck!* Tomorrow would be the last day of his life. No need to worry about rabies. He glanced at his watch – 12:08 a.m.

So today is the last day of my life, he thought. A cold shiver ran down his legs, and he sank into the sofa. He was tired. He set the alarm on his wristwatch to three a.m. If he woke up at three, it would give him just enough time to pour the explosives from the firecrackers and set up the

trigger for the bomb. All he would need to do later in DC was join the two main wires and walk away. Then – boom!
The bomb would explode, and a new mayhem would start with him firing his AK-74 at the oncoming people. A feeling of glee swept through his entire body.
At that point in time, he was supposed to call Halim, report his progress and get his blessings. But he felt the pain in his arm and the ache in his leg muscles – it had been a long day.
Deciding to call Halim later, he lay down on the sofa and closed his eyes.

AT THE SHARP beeps from his wristwatch, Faizan woke up exactly at three a.m. The corpses of the old man and his pet lay exactly where he had left them hours before. Faizan jumped to his feet, jerked his head to loosen up his neck muscles, and headed for the bathroom. After relieving his bladder, he came back to the living room. He took a look around and decided he liked the house. He liked the size of the living room and its ruggedness. The windows were large and had no drapes. The floor was wooden but was not treated with shiny polish. Faizan thought there was masculinity hidden in that floor.
Faizan liked the isolation and size of this house. He wished he could live in a place just like it in his next life. Though Islam taught him that there would be no reincarnation, Faizan read about Hinduism in high school and learned that Hindus believed in reincarnation. Since then, he secretly believed in a second life. You screw things up, and then you get a second chance in your next life. Faizan liked the idea.
One thing he was certain of was that his next life would be much better and, more importantly, much longer than his current one.
He picked up the bag with his left hand and moved toward the door. A sharp pain struck his left arm, reminding him of the dog bite, and he immediately dropped the bag on the floor. He bent and straightened his arm a few times. It appeared to abate the pain. He picked up the bag with his right hand and then headed for his van.
He repositioned the vehicle so that the passenger-side window was just past the large oak tree, and then he opened all seven firecracker boxes.
He twisted the crackers one by one and poured the explosives into the cans and threw the empty cases right behind the oak tree, so that any passerby

would be unlikely to see the empty shells. He continued his work for ten minutes, and then the pain in his arm came back.

He took a two-minute break and started the chore again. After fifteen minutes, he took another break. Forty-five minutes later, he was done. All eight cans were now filled with explosives, ready to go.

Faizan left the remaining crackers on the van floor, hoping they would add punch when the bomb would go off.

Faizan proceeded to connect the links to the cans. He attached the other end of the links to the main link and the main link to the detonator. He attached the detonator link to one of the two cell phones he had bought only hours earlier.

After reaching his destination, all he would need to do was get away from the vehicle, go down the escalator at the station and, at the right time, make a call from his other phone, causing the phone next to the detonator to start vibrating, and the mayhem would start. Everything was the way Halim had planned, and Faizan had executed mock explosions in Somalia four times.

It had been estimated that the explosion would kill at least fifty Americans, if detonated at a busy time. If the plan went right, Faizan would be riding the escalator downstairs, and then he would start firing his AK-74, and that should kill at least fifty more people. The train commuters would have nowhere to go; they would be trapped on the platform in a hail of his bullets.

Once all his bullets were gone, Faizan would pull the two handguns and continue firing at the fleeing mass before pointing one of the guns at his own head and pulling the trigger.

“According to my estimate,” Halim had said, “at least a hundred people will die. God willing, maybe even more, maybe a hundred and twenty or fifty. Imagine that many dying at the hands of one single man, right at the center of the infidel power. And they will have no clue who did it. It will drive the Washington power-hungry suckers crazy, and the common masses will be afraid, like chickens about to be slaughtered.”

“But what if they figure out you sent me there. And they come after you?” Faizan had asked.

Halim sat down on the hotel chair. “I have thought of that possibility,” Halim had said, touching his beard. “After all, things do go wrong. And I have a contingency plan for that. But even the contingency plan can fail, and I might die.”

Halim had stood, his face looking thoughtful. “I am not fearful of death. But if I survive,” Halim had said ominously, “I will make sure whoever caused those failures will be adequately punished. Even if it is a friend, my family or one of my own brothers. I will punish them.”

Now, Faizan looked at the bomb he had made and chuckled, visualizing the dead people, the concrete walkway drenched with blood, broken hands and severed legs, but before all that killing would happen, in just a few hours, he had more work to do. He walked to the back of the van, picked up the full propane tanks, one by one, and placed them around the explosive-filled cans placed strategically in the passenger area. Then he put the twenty boxes of assorted nails around the propane tanks. He covered the whole thing with a piece of cloth. Conveniently, the vehicle had tinted windows, but Faizan didn’t see the point in taking chances. Some kids might peek, out of curiosity, and tell their parents.

Faizan went back to the house for the third and last time to wash his hands and change the bandage on his wound. His hands were covered with a thin film of explosives. He didn’t mind the smell, but he was worried that his hands would somehow catch fire.

Once the washing was complete, Faizan came back to the house door, looked at the dead old man, kicked him in the belly, and then he walked out and closed the door. Back in his vehicle, he cranked on the ignition. He glanced at his watch – 5:17 am. It was still dark.

A little late but still okay, he thought as he backed out of the driveway. *Now is the time to call Halim and tell him I’m on the last leg of my journey and tell him to cut the big check and send it to my family in Egypt.*

HARRY, BERT’S GRANDSON, heard the gunshots, but he was not sure what the noise was, and he was afraid that it could be the monsters he read about in books. His heart beat faster, and he felt coldness in his feet. He bent his knees further and put his arms around his head. He covered himself with the comforter, and soon he was asleep again. A few hours later, he woke up from a bad dream. He listened hard for the gunshot noise. Nothing. He was not sure if the noise he had heard earlier had been real or another dream. Feeling something was amiss, the boy uncurled and decided to go upstairs and sleep next to his granddad. He stood up and climbed the stairs. He saw that the lights in the living room were on, which was odd. Fearing

high utility bills, his granddad never forgot to put the lights out before going to bed.

Harry went straight to his granddad's bedroom, but he was not there. Harry came downstairs and started looking around.

Harry looked toward the front door and saw his granddad's body lying on the floor. He took two steps closer and saw the dead dog and the puddle of blood. Instantly, he knew something was wrong.

With a fluttering heart, the boy ran to the kitchen and grabbed the phone. He wondered for a second whether he should call his mom or 911. He decided to call his mom, but then he could not remember the number, so instead he dialed 911.

A female voice said, "911, what is your emergency?"

"My granddad is hurt," the boy said frantically. "My granddad is hurt."

"Calm down, honey, calm down. What makes you think your granddad is hurt?"

"He's lying on the floor, and there's lots of blood."

"Tell me where you are?"

"I am in the kitchen, and my granddad is near the door."

"No, I mean what is your address?"

"Hmm…" The boy knew his apartment address, and he tried to remember his grandparents' address, but he simply could not recollect.

"Okay, honey. We're sending someone right away. Just don't hang up. Stay with me. Okay?"

DOERR RECEIVED A call from Mark Louder, the FBI man. "I have some good news."

"Go on." Doerr looked at his watch; it was one p.m. in Dubai.

"There was a murder reported in Virginia. Luckily the deceased man had video cameras on his property that can record in darkness, and it got good images of the killer. We are running the video and the pictures by experts, but the perpetrator looks very much like one of those three men named Faizan for whom we issued those APBs."

"Where is the man now?"

"He was at that Virginia house till five a.m., and then he left. We don't have a clue where he is now."

"Did you get the plate number of his vehicle?"

“Yes, but partially. It is a Georgia plate. We can’t tell the last digit of the plate number. So we are running all ten plate numbers.”
“He is headed for Washington.” Doerr knew it instinctively. From Georgia, Faizan went to Virginia. So the friend Ahmad talked about was in Georgia, and the plate number should help identify the man.
“What?” Louder sounded startled.
“I am saying Faizan is headed for Washington, DC. He is going to do something really bad there. You have to tell them and put the city on high alert.”
“I’m not sure, Max. Washington is a big city. After all, we are just jumping from one conclusion to another.”
“Louder, I’m telling you,” Doerr felt angry again. “He’s going to Washington. Just take it from me.”
“We need more than a hunch to hold a city hostage.”
“I need to go to Washington right now,” Doerr said. There was no point in wasting time in Dubai. There was a bigger problem brewing at home.
“What? I can’t help you with that.”
Doerr knew that. “Thanks for your call.”
Doerr hung up and dialed Lazarus’s number. “I think they have located the man named Faizan. I need to get back home immediately.”
“Where is he now?” Lazarus asked.
“He is headed for Washington. I’m pretty sure.”
“Okay, that’s good,” Lazarus said. “That will be in the FBI’s jurisdiction now. They handle all domestic terrorism issues.”
“I know that. But it originated in a foreign land. So we have to be involved too.”
“I’m not so sure, Max.”
“But my heart says we have to do something. Can you arrange transport for Rosania and me?”
“I can try. But, as I said before, this is now in the hands of the *FBI*.”
“Please, get a plane to take us to DC. I promise I will come back to Dubai and hunt down Halim.”
“Let me see what I can do. I will call you soon.” Lazarus hung up.
Doerr waited by the phone after the call was over. The day was nearing its end in Dubai. In a few hours, the city workers would head for home, and night would sneak into the city. Doerr knew in Washington the city dwellers

were seeing the sun rise and were getting ready for another hectic day of work, but they were unaware what danger might be lurking on the way. Doerr dialed Rosania's room number; she was staying at the same hotel. He gave her the news and told her that she should get ready to head for the USA.

An hour later, Lazarus called. "We have a clandestine fighter jet waiting to take off in a half hour," Lazarus said. "But we have a problem."

"What is that?" Doerr asked.

"It is a two-seater plane. Which means only you or Rosania can be on it."

"Okay, Rosania will have to catch another plane." Doerr sighed and hung up.

He ran to the hotel lobby and hailed a taxi. He left his stuff at the hotel and updated Rosania on the phone from his taxi. "We are lucky to get a plane at all, let alone a super-fast fighter. You rest tonight, Rosania. Take an early morning flight tomorrow, and by tomorrow night, you should be in Washington, DC."

CHAPTER 23

After leaving the old man's house, Faizan got on Interstate 95 and drove for twenty miles before heading for a rest area. He parked his van in the parking lot. He set the alarm on his wristwatch for nine a.m. and closed his eyes for another nap.

But he could not sleep. He dozed off for a while but was woken by the screaming of some children. A bunch of kids, accompanied by their parents, passed his vehicle; the kids were fighting about something and made a lot of noise. The father gave Faizan a dirty look as he passed by, and Faizan looked the other way. He closed his eyes again and thought it would have been nice to have a pair of sunglasses. The sun was up and bright, making it hard to sleep.

After another half hour, Faizan woke up again, this time to the noise made by a bunch of teenagers.

Faizan sighed and decided to head for the restroom to take a leak. On the way back he checked out the store and bought a pair of cheap, dark sunglasses.

Perfect, he thought and put the glasses on. He got back to his van and checked his watch again – 8:15 a.m.

He closed his eyes, trying to catch a last bit of rest, but he was not able to sleep. He dozed on and off. He thought of calling his family in Egypt to say goodbye, but he had clear instructions not to make any unnecessary calls, not even to his family.

"The FBI listens in to all calls made," Halim had said. "Your only calls will be to me, using the coded words."

Halim's words were sacrosanct to Faizan, and he did not call his family.

Faizan waited till nine a.m., and then he drove out of the parking lot, and he was back on the highway. Now he had to search for a Walmart or Home Depot store and pick up four more propane tanks, to make his bomb deadlier. He drove for twenty minutes and took an exit that seemed to have a lot of shops. He drove around for a while but did not see a Walmart or Home Depot store, so he went to a gas station to inquire.

"What do you need?" the store keeper, a twenty-something black woman, asked.

"I am looking for some propane tanks. We're having a party this weekend," he lied.

“We have them right here,” the woman said and smiled. “How many do you need?”
“Four.”
Faizan paid with cash and loaded the four tanks in the rear of the van. At the ramp, Faizan floored the gas pedal into the highway. The plan was to start for Washington at around noon, giving him enough time to reach the chosen spot by four p.m., where the bomb would explode and his bullets would be unleashed.
Faizan parked his van at the next rest area and tried to doze off one more time. At eleven a.m., he called Halim. It was to be his last phone call.
“I have got all the presents, and I’m headed for uncle’s house.” Faizan spoke in coded words, saying he had got the bomb ready and would be heading for Washington soon.
“You are doing great work,” Halim said. “You will be rewarded handsomely, my son. Go and finish the job now.” Halim hung up.
Faizan closed his eyes once again, hoping for an undisturbed siesta. This time he slept for almost an hour and, after waking up, headed for the restroom again. At the store, he bought a turkey sandwich and a packet of potato chips.
Before leaving the store, he thought about the bomb. *Is everything done? The explosive-filled cans. The links. The detonator. The propane tanks and nail boxes. Yes, everything has been done. With one call, I can explode the bomb right now if I want to.*
As he walked back to his vehicle, a feeling of euphoria passed through his body. He was sure that after today’s events, Muslim brothers around the world would worship him.
Faizan got back to his van, adjusted the mirrors and slowly drove out of the parking lot. He was back on Interstate 95. He drove for an hour and noticed that traffic was getting heavier.
As he approached Washington, he saw a river and enjoyed the view of the calm white water that separated the highway from the city where some of the most powerful men in the world lived. He had long imagined what he would do if he ever became as powerful as the US president.
First, he would stop all aid to Israel and give billions to Palestine. Second, he would make all Muslim countries adopt and execute Sharia Law or else lose all trading with America. Third…his spell of imagination broke when a

BMW sedan honked and passed by his vehicle. He realized that he had crossed the lane marker, and it was his mistake, but still he honked back. The Roosevelt Memorial Bridge, which was carefully chosen as the entry point to the city, rather than the Fourteenth Street Bridge, which went through areas that were more closely monitored, was coming up. A bunch of birds flew by, and Faizan started wondering whether it was necessary for him to die.

Was there a way to kill a lot of people and still save his life? Americans would die. Halim would be happy, and Faizan would continue to live. Was that possible?

He was thinking of a way to explode the vehicle and still get away, instead of killing himself. Of course, he would have to hide some details from Halim. If Halim knew about Faizan's change of plan, Halim would certainly come for Faizan and kill him; Faizan knew that. Instead of giving a big check to Faizan's family, Halim would send a big fucking bomb.

"I hate cowards," Faizan remembered Halim saying, "but do you know who I hate even more?"

"The Americans?" Faizan had asked timidly.

"No. The traitors who live among us. Every Brutus must be lynched."

Faizan now wondered if Halim was simply expressing his opinion or threatening him. Faizan wasn't sure.

As per Halim's plan, Faizan was now just a few hours from his death. As he drove over the bridge, he became more and more certain that he could escape with his own life, hide somewhere, maybe in Somalia or Afghanistan, and escape Halim's wrath after dealing the death blow to the Americans.

He had his passport and almost a hundred thousand dollars in that briefcase. The large sum had been given to him just so he could bribe his way out of any situation that jeopardized the mission, if a cop caught him on the way or something like that.

Now he knew who he would hand over those dollars to, if needed – the immigration officer at the Dulles airport. Instead of firing the machine gun on the crowd and turning the handgun on himself, he would just leave them in the vehicle, and after triggering the bomb, he would simply walk away and take a cab to the airport. He even thought of a good excuse in case of a confrontation with Halim – he forgot the ammunition in the vehicle. Due to the tension, he left the rifles and handguns in the van, and then there was no

way he could kill himself – yes, that's what he would say. Yes, that would make a perfect excuse. Faizan chuckled and glanced at the GPS.
He was driving on K Street, and his destination was about a mile away.

DOERR'S FIGHTER JET touched down at Andrews Air Force Base at three p.m. sharp. He had tried to sleep during his flight, but the ride had been super-noisy, and the plane had shaken too much. As soon as he got off the jet, he ran for the car that was waiting for him. He drove out of the lot like a bullet, heading for Washington. It was an official vehicle, equipped with an emergency light, which Doerr turned on whenever he faced congested traffic. He drove on the highway shoulder at times, when needed. Within a half hour, Doerr was inside Washington City. He was desperately trying to think what Faizan's target would be. He figured there was no point going to the White House, the Capitol or the Washington Monument; those places were heavily guarded already. He knew that the terrorists liked to attack transportation systems, since they provided easy access and plenty of publicity. The London attack in 2005, the Madrid attacks in 2004, and the Mumbai attack in 2008 – all involved attacks on a train system during rush hour.
Rush hour was about to begin in Washington city. The Metro Center sprang to Doerr's mind.

AS FAIZAN INCHED toward his destination, the Metro Center, his heart leapt with joy. The GPS showed he was only 0.2 miles away. There were scores of people around, walking by the curbside, tall buildings everywhere, people going in and coming out of them. Faizan noticed the difference between Washington City and the other places he had been in the last couple of days – Augusta, Virginia, North and South Carolina. In those places, he hardly saw any one walking by, and in this city, the streets were teeming with people, scurrying around like ants. Faizan felt proud about the last minute change he had made to the plan. Many infidels would die, and he would live to see another morning, another night.
The Metro Center had been chosen as the target after a heated discussion. A discussion Faizan was not part of. He had heard from Ahmad that when Halim discussed it with the others, some had proposed the White House,

some mentioned the Capitol, and another person talked of the Washington Monument as a target.

Hahim had laughed at the mention of the monument and said, “Have you ever looked at a picture of the place, where it stands? It’s surrounded by concrete and large grass fields. No vehicle can get within five hundred feet of the monument. It’s as though the person who planned it one hundred and fifty years ago knew that it would be a target of sabotage someday. Sending a human bomb would not be a good option either, as it is guarded by tens of security people. The same is true of the Capitol. As for the White House, the road next to it has been closed since 9/11, and it’s also heavily fortified. Let us be practical about the target.”

Faizan knew that, after much deliberation, the Metro Center was chosen for a variety of reasons. First, the fatality count would be high. Second, the place was frequented by people from all walks of life. The consequent closure and increased security would terrorize the common masses for days, if not months. Third, and most importantly, the place was accessible to a car bomb.

“One bomb and a rain of bullets,” Halim had proclaimed to his audience of donors and radicals. “The mayhem created by just one man will kill more than a hundred Satans and scare off thousands.”

The audience had clapped, but one man had raised his hand and said, “What about our own security? The CIA and their Special Ops are ruthless too. Will they not find out we are behind the attack and come after us?”

“Good question. Faizan is going to enter America illegally so there will be no paper trace. He will kill himself in the end so there won’t be any interrogation. The only link is the professor, but I am pretty sure he is no idiot and will keep his mouth shut for his own safety. So no trace, no witness and hundred plus Americans dead at the center of their country. But if you are so scared, then maybe you should not be here. Gentlemen, any more questions?”

There had been no more questions, only claps.

Now, Faizan passed a Starbucks coffee shop; he could see the front of the Metro Center Station. People were going in and out like maggots. He salivated at the thought that many of them would be bleeding on the ground soon, and he would walk away, alive and unharmed. He glanced at his watch – 4:50 p.m. He decided to drive around the block to kill some more time.

After finishing the round, he stopped ten feet away from the entrance to the station and picked up the briefcase that held his passport, the gun, and the cash. With one hand inside his jacket pocket, holding the cell phone, he turned his head and took one last look at his bomb, which would explode soon.

Faizan got out of the van, slammed the door, and started walking toward the wall opposite the station entrance. Facing away from the vehicle, he placed his finger on the preprogrammed button on his cell phone. He would push it when he knew he was safely out of range of the bomb. *Inshallah*.

AFTER PROFESSOR HASSAN and his wife came back from the police station, they were both ashen faced, and neither of them ate anything or spoke to each other. The professor's wife talked to two of her friends on the phone. The professor debated with himself whether he should call anyone but in the end decided not to and stared at the TV, barely following the program on the screen, and he kept pacing in the living room throughout the night.

The next morning, a police car stopped outside the professor's house with its emergency lights on. As the professor watched the car with hope and optimism, two more police cars joined the first one. Soon, there was a knock on the door. Hassan opened the door and saw three male officers standing at the front.

"You found my daughter?" the professor asked, a ray of hope in his voice.

Ignoring the question, the officer in the middle said, "I am Special Agent Steven Roth. We are from the FBI." He flashed his FBI badge.

"What is the matter?" Hassan asked, fear creeping into his voice.

"Do you know someone named Faizan Al-Sourie?"

"Yes. He stayed here for a few days. Have you found him? He has done something bad to my daughter, my only child – she is missing."

Once again, the special agent ignored Hassan, and then he showed Hassan a picture and asked, "Do you know this man?"

"Yes. That's Faizan." The professor pointed his index finger at the picture. "The bastard. Have you found her or not?"

"Did you know the man before?"

"No."

"Then why did you let him stay here?" The special agent frowned and threw a cold look at the professor.
"A friend in Dubai sent him here. He is a student. He is going to study at Georgetown University."
"Sir, please turn around," the special agent said. "You are under arrest."
"But why?"
"Sir, you have been warned. Now please turn around."
Seeing he had no other option, the professor turned, and then he saw his wife. She must have been standing behind him for a while. Fear was visible on her face, and tears streaked down her cheeks.
The agent put the handcuffs on the professor's wrists, and another agent started reading the Miranda rights.
"What have we done?" the wife said in a muted voice. "We have been living in this country for twenty years. And my daughter is missing…" Her voice broke, and she fainted and dropped to the ground.

DOERR REACHED THE Metro Center Station and immediately spotted the van parked at the curbside, and its plate number matched the one given by Louder. The last letter on the plate was L; earlier, the FBI had been unable to determine the last letter from the tape on the video surveillance at the Virginia house. He looked at the van – there was no one inside.
It was a cloudy day, the temperature hanging just above forty degrees. The place was full of people; about two hundred fifty, he estimated. Folks were passing by the van, and so did a handful of vehicles – one car honked for no apparent reason.
Doerr looked around, scanning for a young Egyptian man, who he knew to be about six feet tall with a thick beard, which, Doerr knew, Faizan might have shaved off already. Doerr could not locate the terrorist.
People were walking, running, some away from the abandoned van and some passing it by. He saw one man rushing away; his height and frame matched the description Doerr had. Doerr saw the man close to the wall, and the man was putting his hand in his jacket.
Doerr knew there was no time to lose. He took a calculated risk and screamed, "Down, down, everybody. Get away from the van."
Then he screamed again.

People scurried away, pushing and shoving each other. Some fell to the ground; some lay down on the concrete. Doerr saw a toddler stumble, and a baby was thrown from its stroller.
Doerr turned and ran to the baby. As he reached the infant, the van exploded; the ground shook, and metal pieces exploded outward in the immediate vicinity. Tires screeched as cars slammed on their brakes, and people screamed and ran, ducking for cover.
Doerr picked up the baby, who was startled but unharmed. He handed the wailing child to its shell-shocked mother.
He turned to the van; the smoldering skeleton of the vehicle stood there as a witness to the horrific incident that was taking place. Ten or eleven people could be seen standing with bloody hands. Ten more were on the ground, not moving at all.
Doerr knew that the man who he had seen standing against the wall minutes before was none other than Faizan, the Egyptian man sent by Halim to kill Americans.
Doerr looked at the wall where he had spotted Faizan only moments before. Doerr looked to the right and then to the left – no Faizan. The man was gone, no trace left.
Out of desperation, Doerr ran in the direction Faizan had been facing. He ran ten blocks. Doerr was panting and breathing like a chimney. He couldn't see Faizan. Doerr kept running.
Onlookers stared at Doerr. But he didn't care; he ran another ten blocks and felt a sharp pain in his leg, reminding him of the hip injury he had. He ignored the pain and kept running, drawing his gun in case he needed it.
Doerr darted forward, and now he could see Faizan rushing away at a distance, carrying a black briefcase. Doerr pushed harder; the sharp pain from his hip sprang up into his upper body.
Faizan was pretty far ahead, and then he took a turn. Doerr ran faster, and when he reached the turn, Faizan was more than two hundred feet away, and there were other people around him.
Doerr aimed his Glock at Faizan's right leg. It was a long shot.
Doerr would have preferred a rifle, an M4 or higher. But the Glock was the only firearm he had. He leveled the barrel at Faizan's knee. Doerr knew a Glock was not the best choice of weapon under the circumstances. There was a high risk he would miss and could hit a member of the public. But

Doerr knew he had to take that chance. If Faizan ran away, they might never be able to catch him.

Doerr aimed the gun and pulled the trigger. A bird, startled by the crack of the firearm, flew from one window to another, and Doerr saw Faizan stumble to the ground. Two passersby stopped walking and looked at Faizan curiously while four others rushed away.

Doerr ran toward Faizan, the Glock in his hand. When he drew near, Doerr slowed and pointed the gun at Faizan, who was lying on the ground. Doerr took slow steps and tried to see if Faizan was holding a firearm, but it appeared he was not. Faizan was teetering in pain, left hand holding his knee. There was an open briefcase lying about five feet away from the Egyptian man. Dollar bills were strewn on the cobblestoned walkway, and some bills fluttered in the air.

As Doerr closed in, Faizan tried to crawl away, and he looked pathetic. Faizan’s jacket was dirty, his hair unkempt, and lips bloody. Doerr came closer, and Faizan conjured a gun, seemingly out of nowhere, and pointed the gun at Doerr and fired. The bullet hit Doerr’s left shoulder, and he felt his collarbone shatter into pieces. Doerr’s gun fell to the ground. His knees hit the cobbles immediately, and he extended his hands and touched the ground, hoping to soften the fall. But as soon as his hand touched the ground, he felt the sharp pain in his shoulder. So he grabbed his shoulder with one hand and saw Faizan staggering to his feet and away.

Doerr mustered just enough energy to pick up his Glock, and shot Faizan in the back. From the way Faizan fell to the ground this time, Doerr could tell Faizan would not be going anywhere, anytime soon. Knowing Faizan could not shoot him from that far away, Doerr rested his head on the ground and heard the growing wail of the approaching police cars.

HALIM SAT IN front of a large-screen TV in a plush hotel room, somewhere in the Middle East. Two other men were sitting next to him. Halim frowned as the al-Jazeera news anchor appeared on TV. “There was an attack at the Metro Center train station in Washington, DC, today. A van with a crude bomb inside exploded. It could be heard from miles away. Due to a man who warned the public in the nick of time, only two people died. More than twenty are injured, five of them seriously. The FBI is investigating, and a press conference is due to take place in an hour.”

Halim looked at the other two men with disdain. One of them was Raafiq, Halim's brother, who had been hiding from public view after escaping from France.
"Just two people dead?" Halim roared.
Raafiq and the third man shook their heads.
"Maybe some of the injured ones will die soon," the third man said sheepishly.
Ignoring the third man, Halim groaned. "Just two dead? Traitor. That Faizan is a big traitor. He detonated the bomb and ran. He did not fire his rifle. He did not lay down his life. All that training and effort went in vain."
"We can't be sure of that, brother." Raafiq tried to mollify Halim. "Maybe Faizan did his job."
"Then why is that fucking al-Jazeera man not talking about it?" Halim turned his stoic face toward Raafiq. "He should be talking about bullets coming out of rifles, killing infidel after infidel!"
"Maybe the Americans are afraid." Raafiq pointed his hand toward the TV. "They don't want to tell their citizens how brave we are and how many more people have died in Washington. Maybe…"
"No." Halim shook his head and raised his hand, stopping Raafiq from speaking further. "Faizan betrayed us. Only hours before he told me everything was in place for the attack. So he was lying. I should have known. He did not want to die in the beginning. He is probably talking to the CIA right now, making a deal. I did so much work and only two dead? Do you think that is justice?"
Raafiq and the third man shook their heads. No.
No one talked for a few seconds, and then Halim picked up the TV remote and pressed the OFF button.
"Bring me Faizan," Halim commanded in a cold voice. "*Raafiq*, bring me a platter with Faizan's head on it."
Raafiq stood up, made a fist and said, "I will kill Faizan and bring his head. I promise you, brother."

CHAPTER 24

Doerr woke up in a room well lit by fluorescent lights. The room was about ten by eight feet, the marbled floor neatly cleaned and the door half closed. He was lying on a bed, wrapped in a white blanket, which he removed and tried to peer beyond the half-closed door, but he could see only a white wall. Determined to find out more, he got off the bed, and then he saw the IV sack and a monitor on a stand.

He realized that he was in the hospital, and then he remembered being shot. A picture of the man who had held the gun flashed in his mind – Faizan.

In a reflex, he touched the shoulder that had been penetrated by a bullet; he was not sure how long ago that had happened. His shoulder was tightly bound with a white bandage. Though there was no pain, anxiety filled his mind suddenly.

He poked his head out the door and asked, “Anyone here?”

No one answered.

He took off the IV needle from his wrist.

He walked out of his room and saw an elderly woman lying on a bed in the next room – another patient. Plastic pipe ran from her arm to the saline-filled IV bag. Lines flickered across the monitor. The woman appeared to be asleep.

Two nurses approached Doerr and ordered him to lie down on his bed.

“I have to go,” Doerr pleaded. “You don’t know who I am. I have a very important job to do.”

“Whatever it is that you do,” the older, overweight nurse said, “it will have to wait. You are not going anywhere in the next twenty-four hours. Do you understand?”

Doerr angrily shook his head. “There are bigger things at stake right now. I have to…”

The other nurse cut in. “Mr. Doerr, you were lucky the bullet didn’t totally break your collarbone, but it is badly bruised. The surgeon took out the slug, but he insisted you must be kept under observation for at least twenty-four hours.”

“I see what you are saying.” Doerr calmed down and feigned agreement. He lay down on the bed and said, “Okay. But I’m very hungry now. Can I get something to eat?”

“Yes, we will get you some soup.” The older nurse smiled at last. “And you don’t get off that bed. Understand, big boy?”
Doerr nodded. As the two nurses walked away, Doerr stood up. He was not going to waste his time in a hospital bed. He knew he had to escape the hospital. But there was a problem. He was wearing a hospital gown, and his wallet was gone.

IT TOOK SOME deft talking, some lying but mostly bribing, for Doerr to get his stuff back.
After getting out of the hospital, Doerr made a few calls, and then he took a cab to where Faizan was being questioned.
Doerr entered the interrogation room; it was dark, except for around the chair where Faizan sat, shackled. An overhead bulb hung from the ceiling right above the chair. His sweaty face looked exhausted but defiant.
Doerr stood in front of Faizan. Two other men flanked him, one of whom said, “We have been talking to Faizan for a while. But the bastard has been bullshitting us for hours. See if you can do something.”
Doerr stood in front of Faizan and looked into his eyes.
“Who sent you here?” the thirty-something muscleman, standing to Doerr’s right, thundered at Faizan.
“Allah,” Faizan said and pointed his eyes up.
“I will send you to hell,” the man on Doerr’s right said and kicked Faizan’s bare foot, “if you don’t tell us your boss’s name.”
Faizan shook his head. The pain in Doerr’s shoulder was making a comeback, the anesthetic wearing off.
The muscled man on Doerr’s right took his gun out and pressed it against Faizan’s forehead. “Tell us what you guys were planning? When exactly did you get in the country?”
“I was sent here by the Almighty to teach you infidels a lesson, and I was supposed to die.” Faizan spat on the floor. “And now the Almighty is punishing me for not carrying out his orders.”
The man on Doerr’s right looked dejected. “It has been such a long night.” He looked at Doerr, pointed his hand to Faizan and said, “We have been interrogating this guy for three hours. But the bastard hasn’t budged. Maybe only you can extract something from him.”

Doerr thought for a few seconds. “You can still live.” Doerr put his hand on Faizan’s chair and bent down. Doerr’s nose was within inches of Faizan’s. “Tell us the truth. You can start with what you did to the professor’s daughter.”
Faizan’s eyes flickered. He swallowed and licked his lower lip.
“Tell us, you son-of-a-bitch.” The interrogator on Doerr’s left, who had not said anything in the last minute, kicked the ground. “You killed the girl. Didn’t you? What else did you do to her?”
“She is in hell now,” Faizan said defiantly.
Doerr looked into Faizan’s eyes. “Where is her body?”
“I don’t remember, somewhere in Virginia.”
“Where in Virginia?”
“I don’t know. I dumped her body in a lake near a road.”
“Where is Halim?” Doerr grabbed a handful of Faizan’s hair. “What is his number?” Doerr knew Faizan had been calling Halim, but he may not know where Halim was. If the CIA could get hold of the number, there was a good chance that they could locate Halim.
Faizan sat silently, and then suddenly he threw kicks in the air. “I want to die. Somebody kill me. Allah, forgive me.” He pushed his feet on the ground, and the chair toppled backward, and his head hit the ground with a thud.
Doerr saw a gash in the back of Faizan’s head, and blood began to ooze out. Doerr knew what Faizan was trying to do, injure himself and gain sympathy. It was an old trick employed by many criminals. Doerr remained calm and shouted for a doctor.
A young paramedic, carrying a box, came in. He looked at Faizan’s wound and shook his head. “We have to take him to the hospital.”
Ten or fifteen minutes later, an ambulance with armed security guards came and took Faizan away.
Doerr thought of going back to the hospital where he had been just hours before. He touched his wounded shoulder, and it felt okay to him. The pain had lessened some. He felt a trip to the hospital was unnecessary, and if he went, getting out again may not be easy.
He called a cab and booked a room at a nearby hotel.
It was three a.m. when the cab picked Doerr up. The roads were deserted, walkways empty, no honking cars, no one talking on cell phones and crossing the road at the same time, and even the cabbie was silent.

Doerr reached the hotel room in less than twenty minutes. He grabbed a frozen turkey sandwich from the mini fridge, microwaved it, took a bite, and then slumped on the bed. But he could not sleep. Faizan's face was lingering in his head.

To forget Faizan, Doerr turned on the TV.

A newsman was reporting the mayhem that had taken place earlier in the day. "The attack was seemingly conducted single-handedly by a young man from Egypt, who arrived in the country illegally. How and where the man entered America isn't clear. Only two people were killed in the attack, as most of the public turned away from the exploding vehicle, thanks to the warning of a law enforcement officer from either the local police or the FBI. The FBI is investigating how the Egyptian man got a vehicle, the explosives and was able to travel all the way to Washington, DC. They are saying that they have more questions than answers right now. We just have to be patient."

Doerr changed the channel. He knew that CIA agents' names were never expressly mentioned in news reports. Credit always went to the other authorities. But one thing he was sure about – Faizan could not have done everything on his own. He must have had help, and it had not come from that Augusta professor; it had to be from someone else.

DOERR WOKE UP at eight thirty the next morning. He tried to get up and felt the pain in his shoulder; he had almost forgotten about his wound. He ordered a huge breakfast to gather enough energy for the day ahead. He went to the downstairs shop and purchased a bottle of maximum strength Tylenol to take care of his pain.

He came back to his room and looked outside through the window. The city had returned to its hectic activities. Students were headed for their classes, wearing sports jackets. Lawyers walked by, in their spotless suits, and drivers honked constantly. From his window, he watched countless cabs dropping customers at the hotel.

Doerr turned away from the window, picked up his cell phone and dialed Gayle's number.

"When are you coming back?" she asked.

"I'm not sure. We apprehended the guy who exploded the bomb. Now some questioning is going on. We still don't know where the mastermind is."

“The CIA arrested the man?” Gayle sounded surprised. “On the TV they are saying the FBI did all the work.”
“No, we did. Our name never goes on the TV. Think of it as a classified detail.”
“What are you going to work on today?”
“The guy tried to kill himself yesterday, so he was taken to the hospital. Today he should be back. We are going to get the information out of him one way or another. Hopefully he will sing soon, and then I can move on to finding Samuel.”
“When are you coming home, Max?”
“Soon, baby. Soon. Samuel is still sitting on my chest, choking me. If they don’t let me go after him, then I’m going to quit and hunt for him all by myself.”
“But what do you think will be the chance of success if you go it alone?”
“That’s the thing.” Doerr heard a knock on the door. “I will call you tonight, okay?” Doerr said and hung up and opened the door.
It was the concierge. He came in with a double omelet with bacon, a large Croissan’wich with ham and cheese, a large portion of hash browns and black coffee: a traditional, fat-loaded, American breakfast. He finished every morsel of the food and sipped his coffee.
He received a text message from the agency. ‘Bird is back in a new nest and car on the way.’ Faizan was back from the hospital.
Doerr rushed his coffee and put on black slacks and a white shirt. He put the tie in his pocket, to be knotted in the car, and headed for the lobby. He picked up another cup of coffee at the hotel lobby and waited outside.
A white sedan stopped next to the curb, and Doerr instantly knew that it was his ride by looking at the driver, who was a thirty-something man in a suit, obviously not a driver by profession. Doerr got in and sat on the passenger seat. The vehicle started moving, slowly at first and then it picked up speed. Its dashboard was extra large with a large monitor.
The car took Interstate 66, heading west, before taking an exit that led to an increasingly rural area.
Doerr looked around, and he could see only trees and glimpses of a few far-between houses. The road was dotted with potholes, perhaps on purpose – to keep the agency interrogation house as far away from the public’s eyes as possible.
The driver asked, “First time here?”

“Yes.”
“Did you join the agency recently?”
“Not really,” Doerr said and then changed the topic. “These houses look privately owned.”
“They are. Our agency bosses decided we needed a jail-cum-interrogation facility in an area that looked like a residential place. A place where journalists or the civil rights groups won’t be poking their heads.”
“How long have you been working at this jail-cum-interrogation facility?” Doerr asked.
“A month. But I like the place already. You see, this place is just fifteen miles away from the center of DC, very convenient for everyone. It was constructed just five years back, when George Bush was president.”
“I see.”
“He was a good president, by the way,” the driver said. “I know the whole country hates him, but I think he was a courageous man.”
Doerr was irritated to see where the conversation was going. “I also admire George Bush. I like all the presidents. People think being the president is easy. It’s not. But I will tell you one thing.” Doerr turned to the driver. “At work we should never express political views. We do our job and leave the opinions for the gutters of newspaper op-eds and blogs.”
The young driver did not reply. Perhaps he realized that Doerr was correct.
The car turned into a driveway, and the ride became smooth again. The driveway was winding, definitely on purpose so people could not see much from outside, and lined with tall trees. A hundred feet into the driveway and nothing was visible – no road, no neighbor’s house. The car approached a large gate made of iron bars, and it opened without making a noise. The car drove through slowly and came to a stop.
“This is it,” the driver declared.
The house in front of them looked like a multimillionaire’s mansion.
Escorted by the driver, Doerr entered through the front door, and immediately there was a large staircase leading downstairs. Doerr was led into the basement, and they passed at least ten huge rooms. The space in the basement looked to be many times larger than the house on top.
The young driver stopped in front of a room and scanned his ID card on the scanner. A red light flickered twice and then turned green.
“Here you go. I will be upstairs if you need anything,” the driver said and walked away.

The door opened automatically, and Doerr walked in. Inside, Faizan lay on a stretcher, wearing white pajama pants and a shirt, his head bandaged. His arms, legs, and head were strapped, so he could not do what he had done the day before.
Doerr stood in front of the bed; two other men were already there.
The first man pointed to Faizan and said, “This guy is one tough bastard. Whenever I ask something, he either says ‘I do not know’ or ‘only Allah knows.’”
“Did you give him a dose of the truth serum?” Doerr asked.
“We already gave him twice the allowed amount,” the second man said and was about to smack Faizan with his elbow.
“Stop,” Doerr said and brought his face right above Faizan’s. “Look, young man. I know the game you are playing. It’s not going to work here. If you talk, you have a chance to live, even go back to Egypt someday. If you play hardball, you are definitely heading for the execution chamber.”
But Faizan was unmoved; there was not even a flicker in his eyes.
“You tell us where Halim is,” one of the two men, holding a wooden rod, said angrily. “Tell us who helped you set up your attack. Or else we will crack open your balls, just the way you opened the firecrackers to make your bomb.”
The questioning, threatening and beating continued for another hour. Faizan had bled from his head the day before, and now blood oozed from his arms and legs. There were bruises on his knees and elbows. Faizan replied to some questions with a grunt, but he remained silent to most. Occasionally he tried to shake his head but stopped immediately; the metallic head restraint seemed to be hurting.
“Look, we know the house on Al Omrani Road in Cairo where your parents live,” Doerr said. “We can send someone to take care of them. In fact, your own government will throw them into jail if we tell them to. And guess who gave us that info? Ahmad. Remember him?” Doerr lied. “Ahmad has already turned into our informer.”
“No!” Faizan tried to protest in a feeble voice.
“No? Look at this,” Doerr flashed a photograph where Ahmad and Doerr stood together, shoulder to shoulder, a photo Rosania had taken in the Dubai hotel.
Doerr thought he saw a flicker in Faizan’s eyes, but he thought he could be wrong about that. “I am going to leave now,” he said to the other

interrogators. “And I will come back in a few hours.”
“Our psychiatrist will come at around noon,” one man said, pointing to Faizan. “We will know more about what’s going on in this asshole’s head.”
Doerr turned to leave. He walked upstairs, took out his phone and dialed the number of a person he knew who could impersonate virtually any male voice.

AT THREE P.M. the same day, Doerr was back at Faizan’s bed. Shamil, a man from Mossad, Israel’s intelligence arm, was already there. Doerr had worked with him years ago, on a project to extract information from two Libyan spies who had been caught in Saudi Arabia and handed over to the CIA.
Shamil had a reputation for being an extraordinary interrogator who pretended to be sympathetic to the captive’s cause and extracted valuable details. Hamas had tried to kill him many times. A year back, when he had been coming out of an office in London, a 9mm bullet almost killed him. The bullet had flown by his head, taking a few strands of his long hair with it. Mossad had hired Shamil right after 9/11; a year back he had completed his PhD in psychology from Oxford University.
Doerr faced Shamil, towering over his short frame. “Anything new?”
“I don’t know when you talked to him last. I have been conversing with him,” Shamil pointed at Faizan, “for last two hours. I think he strongly believes that Halim will come and save him somehow, and all he has to do is keep his mouth shut. I also think he has remorse that he didn’t carry out the original plan; he was to shoot into the crowd, then turn his gun on himself.”
“But is he ready to spill everything he knows about Halim?” Doerr asked.
“That I can’t tell right now. But he is one tough zealot.” Shamil paused and then said, “Did your guys find out anything more on how he made the bomb and drove to DC?”
“Yeah, they found the remains of two rifles in the vehicle he blew up. The rifles are badly burnt. They think they were loaded.” Doerr turned to Faizan, who was trying to listen to their conversation. “Did he say who helped him set up the goods in his van?”
“No,” Shamil said. “It appears to me that he did a lot of the work himself. But it is impossible for one person to get all the material and construct a

bomb like that without some good help."
"Thank you, Shamil." Doerr looked at the Israeli man. "Now let me talk to him."
"How are you?" Doerr turned and said to Faizan softly.
Faizan simply nodded.
"Where is Zarin?" Doerr asked.
Faizan didn't say anything and didn't move.
"What did you do to the girl? Rape her?" Doerr shouted, anger creeping into his brain. "Then kill her?"
Faizan pointed his finger up, indicating that she was dead.
"Where did you hide her body? You son-of-a-bitch." Doerr took out a handgun and pressed its barrel against Faizan's lips. "Tell me now, or else I will shoot you in the eye."
"Tell me," Doerr screamed and smacked Faizan's face with the gun. Blood showed on Faizan's lips. Shamil watched Doerr as he smacked Faizan again. Faizan spat out blood on Doerr's shirt, and Doerr slapped him again.
"You think Halim is coming to save you? He won't because he is busy trying to kill Ahmad," Doerr lied. "Ahmad is helping us now. He has landed in New Jersey with his family."
Faizan shook his head; he didn't believe it.
Doerr took out his phone, pressed the redial button and put it on speaker.
"*Inshallah*." It was the voice impersonator that Doerr had talked to hours before.
"Talk to him," Doerr said to Faizan and held the phone close to Faizan's ear.
"Ahmad?" Faizan said in a shaken voice. "Where are you?"
"I am in Patterson, New Jersey. I flew in today."
"Are you in touch with Halim?"
"No, and I wish I had never met him. I heard he has hired someone to kill me. Son, tell those men everything. They will let you live, and maybe someday you will live freely in America, which is what you wanted. Allah never taught us to hurt anyone, let alone kill people."
Faizan sighed. Doerr hit the red button on his cell phone, ending the call.
Doerr crouched to bring his face close to Faizan's ear. "Now tell me everything. I will make sure you get a light sentence." That was a lie too; Doerr knew Faizan would never get anything less than life in jail.
"Okay." Faizan closed his eyes but did not say anything. Apparently he was thinking hard, and then he started telling them everything.

The confession was being recorded. Two FBI detectives and two CIA men joined Doerr to listen in, and they stood silently behind Doerr.
Faizan spoke for an hour. He detailed how he got into America, about the boat ride across Rio Grande River, about the non-religious professor's wife, and what led him to kill Zarin, the teenaged daughter of the professor, and where exactly her body was, and how he had assembled the bomb.
"Back up, back up," Doerr said. "Who was the man who gave you the firecrackers?"
"I don't know his real name. But Halim referred to him as Sigma."
"But you saw him. Correct? Tell me what he looks like."
"He is tall and had a scar on his right cheek. Halim said he worked for American authorities before. But now works for him, for money."
Samuel's face flashed in Doerr's mind. *Tall and a scar on his right cheek. Can that be Samuel, by any chance*? Doerr wondered. It was surely worth a try.
"Where did you meet him?"
"Virginia."
"Where in Virginia?"
Faizan gave the Virginia address.
Doerr turned to the FBI and CIA men who were standing behind him, who had been just spectators so far. "I gotta go," Doerr said.
"Come on, Max," one of the FBI men said. "We still have a lot of work to do."
"We need you, Max," one CIA man said. "You have all the background info. Don't leave now."
"I'm leaving the work to able colleagues like you." Doerr hurried to the door. "Shamil is here. He's a great man to work with. You guys will do just fine. You have my number, anyway."
Doerr did not wait for a reply. He thought he had enough to go after the mysterious man who could turn out to be Samuel.
After looking around in the facility for a few minutes, Doerr located the young man who had driven him in the morning. The young man was in one of the rooms upstairs. The room was full of security monitors. Along with three other men, the young driver was watching one of the monitors and was talking to someone on the phone in an agitated manner.
"Buddy," Doerr said to him, "I need to borrow the car, just for ten, fifteen minutes."

The man put his hand in his pocket, took out a car key and handed it to Doerr without looking at him. Doerr took the key and rushed outside.
He drove to the nearest rental company. On the way, he thought of talking to Lazarus and telling him that he was headed for a house in Virginia, to look for Samuel. Then he decided not to. *What if Lazarus decides to send someone else to Virginia and tells me to go back to interrogating Faizan?* Doerr could not risk that.
He rented a Chevy sedan and headed immediately for the address Faizan had given him. It was five p.m., and the lazy winter sun had already gone down. Doerr was racing down the highway where traffic was getting thicker; hard-working people were hitting the road to get back home after work.
It took one hour to reach Interstate 95 South. By the time Doerr arrived at the house in Emporia, Virginia, it was nine p.m. It was dark outside and inside. Doerr parked his car in the driveway, seeing no other vehicle there.
Doerr watched from his sedan. It was a large house for the area, perhaps four or five bedrooms. Many rich people in Washington, who lived in tiny houses or condos, liked to have a large house in a more rural area. Maybe the owner lived in Washington and visited over weekends. Maybe the owner was Samuel. Maybe.
Keeping the car headlights on, Doerr got out of his vehicle. He held a Glock in his hand. An abundance of weeds in front of the house indicated the owner did not care much about maintenance.
Doerr stood at the door and peered inside. With the dim light, the only thing he could make out was that the carpeted floor was fairly clean.
Doerr kicked open the door. Glass shattered, and a piece of wood broke off. Doerr got into the house and closed the door immediately. He moved his hand over the wall, looking for a switch. He found it, turned it on, and light flooded the hallway.
It seemed like an average-looking house. First, he looked for any hanging frames with photographs. There were none. Then he scavenged the house for any receipts, letters, or magazines – anything that would identify the owner. It appeared the owner took good care of eliminating traces. There was no landline phone either.
At last, he called his contact at the agency. “I am trying to identify the owner of an address.”
“What is the address, sir?”

Doerr gave the address.
After a minute the man at the other end said, “We don’t have the address in our database.”
“Can’t you identify who owns the deed?”
“Yes, but we can do that tomorrow only. Our computers are down for maintenance tonight.”
Doerr glanced at his watch. It was almost eleven p.m. “No, it can’t wait for tomorrow,” Doerr said. “There is a killer on the loose. If we are going to catch him, this has to be done tonight.”
“Don’t get upset, sir. I am only doing my job. Tell you what, let me wake up some people and see what I can find. I will call you back in about an hour.”
“Thank you…sorry, I forgot your name.”
“Thomas, most people call me Tommy.”
“Thanks, Tommy. I will be waiting for your call.”
Doerr hung up, made coffee, and then he went out to get a pack of cigarettes. He drove around looking for a gas station in the area, but they were all closed; it was a small town. He drove to Interstate 95. At a rest area, he found what he was looking for.
He bought a pack, lit a cigarette, and went back to the car.
Soon, he was back in the empty house. It was thirty minutes past midnight, and he was still waiting for Tommy’s call. He looked around the house, hoping to find a clue that he had missed, maybe a document. He looked under the mattress, in kitchen cupboards, bathroom cabinets – nothing.
He called Tommy.
“I was just about to call you, sir,” Tommy said. “Here is what I’ve found. The house is owned by a man named John Clark. He is an insurance agent and lives in Miami, Florida. He bought the house three years back, for two hundred sixty-eight thousand dollars.”
“You have a contact number?”
“Yes, I have a home number. Please, note it down – 305…” Tommy gave the rest of the number.
Doerr wrote it down and hung up.
He dialed the Miami number immediately – it went to voicemail, just as he had expected. He hung up, and then he redialed and left a polite message, asking the owner to call him back. He was sure the man would not call until the next day.

Doerr dialed the FBI's Terrorism Task Force department's number. A man picked up.
After introducing himself, Doerr said, "We need to question a man in Florida who is possibly…not possibly, *surely* connected to the bombing in Washington. We need to bring him in and show some tough love."
"It's one in the morning," the FBI man said. "We can go and talk to him. But if he refuses to help, we cannot arrest him. We would need a judge to sign an arrest warrant. That will easily take a couple of hours in the morning. So the best scenario is we could arrest him by noon."
"That might be too late," Doerr said but did not explain the suspected connection between that man and Samuel, the ex-CIA operative. "Do the best you can."
"Will do, and we'll keep you posted. Meanwhile, send me all the evidence and documents you have against the Miami man."
Doerr paused and thought for a few seconds. "Okay, I will have it sent in a couple of hours."
Doerr hung up. He was not sure what document he could send.
After turning all the lights off, he sat down on the reclining chair in the living room, enveloped in the darkness that helped him think better. He rocked back and forth. He was positive that a Miami insurance agent had not provided Faizan with explosives. Samuel had somehow got the house. He must have either coerced someone to let him use the house for some time or maybe he had simply broken into the house, just like Doerr himself had done.
Doerr had no doubt that Samuel would try to flee the Washington area. He would perhaps leave the country, or worse, he might have left the country already. Doerr felt a shiver run down his legs.
Samuel had surely received a hefty sum from Halim and was perhaps headed to the Carribean or his favorite vacation place – Paris or some other exotic place. Alerting the airlines was useless too, as Samuel would definitely use an alias and a false passport. But then, maybe Faizan's helper was someone other than Samuel. But in Doerr's mind, there was enough evidence to support his theory about Samuel.
It was two a.m. Feeling flustered, Doerr decided to catch a few hours of sleep before deciding his next course of action. He lay down on the sofa and closed his eyes, but he was unable to sleep. Samuel's face haunted his mind, as if mocking him.

He lifted the sofa cushion, to see if something was hidden there, and then swiped his hand underneath – nothing.
He tried to sleep again. But then he knew it was useless to even try. So he got up and started pacing in the living room. He went to one of the bedrooms; he had already scanned the room twice. In the corner, under the table, he saw a box. He wiggled it, and the top fell off – it was a shredder. He poured the shredded contents on the floor and started the near-impossible puzzle of matching the pieces. It was hard work. By six a.m. all he had was a Home Depot receipt with a date, time and the last four digits of a credit card number.
He called Tommy again. Doerr gave him the Home Depot address and other details. “We need to look up the recent activities on that card, *immediately*.”
Tommy sighed. “They aren’t likely to give customer data without a court order. Moreover, everybody is sleeping right now.”
“You contact the NSA and get that info. I need results,” Doerr barked, “and not excuses.”
“Let me see what I can do. I will call you back in an hour.”
“It’s six ten right now. If I don’t get a call by seven ten, I will be calling your manager. Understand?”
“I understand, sir.”
Doerr hung up.
The waiting game began. The sun was about to sneak over the horizon and put an end to the darkness.
Doerr made some coffee and smoked two more cigarettes. He called the FBI. As expected, the Florida man was completely uncooperative, and the FBI was seeking an arrest warrant.
It was six forty a.m. when his phone rang.
Doerr drained the dregs of his coffee and picked up the phone after two rings. “Hello. You found something?” He expected the call to be from Tommy.
But the call was from Lazarus. “You should have been talking to Faizan or resting in the hospital,” Lazarus said angrily. “What are you doing in Virginia?”
“Lazarus, thanks for calling,” Doerr said. “I was going to call you soon. I need some authorization for some lookups. I am sure Samuel was in this house, and I’m ninety percent sure he is about to leave the country.”

“Max, listen. You are injured, and your wife needs you. You have done enough already. You have stopped mayhem in Washington, and the country is grateful to you. I say you take some time off. Go to New York and take some rest. Okay?”

“No, Lazarus. I have to find Samuel. He killed my only son and…” Doerr was about to tell him the dark truth, that he was the one who killed the DEA administrator. But he held back; he would tell Lazarus the truth someday, but he knew today was not the day. “Lazarus, I have to get him. If I go back to New York, I won’t be able to rest anyway.”

Ten minutes later, the conversation ended. Doerr wondered why Lazarus kept saying he should go back to New York. It was almost like he did not want Doerr to find Samuel.

Was it possible that Lazarus didn’t want him to be successful? Did Lazarus really think the work was complete?

Doerr brushed aside that thought. It was more than an hour and half since he had talked to Tommy. It would be a waste of time to talk to him again. He called the eighteen technicians he knew at CIA’s Science and Technology department. It was tiring and time-consuming. But he knew it was his only chance of getting what he needed.

By noon, he received confirmation that the card belonged to Samuel and a United Airlines ticket had been booked with that card. The ticket was for a flight from Dulles Airport to San Jose, Costa Rica, at 10:50 p.m. that same day.

CHAPTER 25

Doerr watched the human traffic thin out as he waited near the kiosks of United Airlines at Terminal D in Dulles Airport. He had been waiting there for three hours, his Starbucks coffee finished long ago. He was thirsty and hungry, but he could not leave the area, not even for a minute.

It was close to ten p.m., and he was almost ready to give up. He doubted if Samuel would turn up at all. Doerr had been keeping a close eye on the people joining the lines that ended at the United Air check-in counters.

He saw a family of three – Mom, Dad, and a small girl. The father held the passports and boarding passes, and the family headed for the security checkpoint. Two men, one young and the other old, approached the lady at the counter. The young man pulled a huge black suitcase, and the old man had a small carry-on bag.

Doerr looked at the far end, at the empty Lufthansa counters, and his eyes zeroed in back to the line to the United Air counter. And there was Samuel, wearing a blue shirt, almost hidden behind an overweight black man, looking at the display screen above. Doerr had to confront Samuel; he felt the blood boiling in his head, his hands becoming sweaty, and he rushed toward his enemy.

Doerr saw Samuel turn his head toward him and then turn away. Perhaps he had seen Doerr. Doerr was about fifty feet away from Samuel, and that was when it happened. Two black-uniformed security guards moved in, cutting off his path to Samuel.

What the hell! Doerr had to slow down and then halt right before the two guards, who now stood in front of him. Doerr froze as he saw Lazarus show up and stand between the two guards, displaying a hostile pose.

“There is Samuel,” Doerr said to Lazarus. “Right behind you. We have to get him.”

“Let him go, Max,” Lazarus said as one of the two guards placed his hand on his holstered gun. “Let him go. We don’t go after our own people.”

“What do you mean?” Doerr was flabbergasted. “Maybe Samuel used to work for us. But not anymore. Now he works for the terrorists. For Halim.”

“He’s our guy, Max.” Lazarus crossed his arms at his chest. “He works for the CIA.”

“Are you mad, Lazarus? Everyone told me he doesn’t work for the CIA anymore.” Doerr saw Samuel hand over his passport to the lady at the

counter. “Is this a sick joke? Did he come back to the CIA?” Two more guards now joined and formed a barricade around Doerr.
“No.” Lazarus chuckled. “Actually, he never left us. He has been working for the CIA all along.”
“What do you mean? You told me he was suspended and then kicked out of the agency.” Doerr saw the lady at the counter hand Samuel’s passport back to him, and Samuel walked away from the counter. Doerr stepped forward, but the security guards and Lazarus stopped and held him. A scuffle followed, and Doerr ended up on the floor, restrained by the security men. He could no longer see the enemy of his life, the man who took the joy out of his life – Samuel. Now he was not sure if Lazarus was a bigger foe.
He saw two new guards move in, who were telling the curious onlookers to move on and mind their own business.
With a strong jerk, Doerr freed himself from the hands of Lazarus and the guards. When he stood up, Samuel was already gone. “See what you did?” he said to Lazarus. “He killed my son and…”
“And what?” Lazarus closed in and hushed so other than Doerr, no one else would hear him. “Tell me.”
Doerr knew this was certainly not the time to tell Lazarus about the shot he took at New York Central Park.
“And what, Max?” Lazarus taunted him and stood still for five or six seconds and then said, “And Samuel made you kill the DEA administrator?”
Doerr’s jaw dropped. “You knew?” He could not believe it. “You knew all along?”
“Yes, I knew. I knew every step you made after Samuel called you, months back, and you guys met at that bar. You were being watched. You were being followed, Max. We kept close tabs on you. After all, you are the best sniper we ever had. You *are* the assassin.”
“What about those people at the office on Thirty-Third Street? What about the receptionist at Langley? They all told me Samuel does not work for the agency anymore.”
“We set all that up. We were watching you via satellite. We were watching you from the street; we even watched you in your apartment; we watched you from everywhere.”
“Why the charade? If you had asked me nicely to come and work for you, go after Halim, I would have done that.”

“We already asked you to come back, a few years ago. Remember?” Lazarus said. “And you didn’t want to work for us anymore.”
“What about the killings? My son,” Doerr said angrily. “The two people who died at the Metro Center. Samuel works with the terrorists. Faizan said Samuel was working for Halim, believe me.”
“Enough!” Lazarus shouted. “Max, go back to New York, and give me a call later so we can sort everything out. There is no need to make a scene in front of everyone here.” Lazarus pointed his hand at the airline counter, where six people were standing. “Now, if you will excuse me.” Lazarus started walking away.
“Stop,” Doerr said and took two steps toward Lazarus, who kept walking, and the four guards stepped in front of Doerr and blocked his path.
“I warn you, sir,” one of the guards said. “Please, don’t follow the deputy director.”
Doerr looked at the guard and sprang at him. He hit the guard’s face with a swing of his elbow and kicked the groin of the second guard. Doerr threw a strong fist at the face of the third guard and a kick into the belly of the fourth, and then he ran toward Lazarus, who was far away now. Doerr followed him.
Minutes later, Doerr caught up with Lazarus in the parking lot. Except for the four or five people going in and out of the lot, it was empty.
“Lazarus, stop,” Doerr thundered.
Lazarus turned to Doerr with a surprised face. “Oh, you again.”
“Yes, me again,” Doerr said. “We can’t let Samuel get away. Believe me, he is with the terrorists.”
“I trust you.” Lazarus laughed. The parking lot had just enough light for Doerr to see Lazarus’s gleeful face. Lazarus kept walking and talking. “Samuel penetrated Halim’s network. He works from inside. We knew Faizan was coming. We knew he was staying with that professor. Think about this – the terrorists thought they had infiltrated our country, but it was the other way around. We busted them inside out. Now that Halim has been unsuccessful, his helpers will dwindle, and his cash supply will dry up – a true end to a terrorist. Just imagine, if we’d had a mole sitting among those hijackers on 9/11 planes, do you think the result would have been the same?”
Doerr followed Lazarus, and they were now at the middle of the line H of the parking lot where there was no one else around. Light was scant, and

Lazarus's face looked like the devil's to Doerr.
"You crazy man," Doerr said angrily. "Faizan killed four people, and my son is dead." Doerr clenched his teeth. He wanted to hit Lazarus, but he controlled himself. "What about my son? He was my only kid? What did he do?"
"Your son? You know he was not a good kid. He was into drugs. If he didn't die from an overdose, the New York gangs would have killed him." Lazarus paused. "Go back to New York, just like I told you to. Go back to New York and fuck your wife. You will soon have another child."
Blood rushed to his head, and his fingers tightened into fists. Doerr grabbed Lazarus's neck and pressed him against the back of a van.
"You know there are security cameras here," Lazarus said, a smirk lurking on his face.
"I don't care," Doerr said, but then he let go of Lazarus's neck slowly. "And what about the DEA administrator? How dare you hatch a plan to kill someone like that?"
"That administrator was a bad-ass, cocky bastard, a friend of the president. We decided he had to be eliminated. He was shaking up too many things at the border, and it was hampering our operations."
"What operations?"
"You don't need to know."
"No, maybe I don't need to know," Doerr said. "But why did you choose me to kill him? Tell me why."
"We chose you," Lazarus looked at the asphalt ground, "because you left the agency with a bad reputation. Because no one would believe you if things went wrong. Trust me, no one. And above all – you are the only person we know who could have made that shot."
"Tomorrow," Doerr stepped closer, his nose barely six inches from Lazarus's, and hushed, "I am going to go to the president, and I'm telling him everything you have done. Your ass will be lying on K Street."
"Yeah." Lazarus moved his hand dismissively. "Go and tell the president that his friend was murdered, and you are the one who pulled the trigger. Let's see whose head rolls."
Doerr saw the conundrum. If he told the president, the president would be angry, and that was if he could get past the aides to speak to the president himself.
Doerr didn't say anything; his head was hot like a blast furnace.

Lazarus continued, “Come, join my hand, Max. You will do well. No one will ever know who killed the DEA administrator, and you can spend the rest of your life at the agency, with a nice high salary. I’ll get you a desk job if you want. Let’s make a deal.” Lazarus extended his hand.

“Tell me one thing,” Doerr said. “Did you guys make 9/11 happen? Was that a setup too, like all those websites say? Tell me!”

“Now you are being ridiculous. I will say it again – go back to the big city. Take a couple of weeks off and then come back.” Lazarus tapped Doerr’s shoulder. “We’ve got a lot of work to do, Max. Halim is still alive and trying to kill more Americans. Don’t forget, protecting America is what we do. Think about it.” Lazarus turned to leave.

“You fucking bastard,” Doerr shouted. “I will tell everyone everything. If I’m guilty of anything, then I’m ready for punishment.”

Lazarus kept walking away and waved his hand dismissively again.

“I will go and talk to Stonewall tomorrow,” Doerr spoke loudly so Lazarus, who was about twenty feet away now, could hear him. “I will tell her everything, and you will lose.”

Lazarus turned and walked back to Doerr. “Has Stonewall ever participated in an operation? No. You did and I did, Max. That bitch is sitting at the top, and she doesn’t have a clue about the real world. I have been in the agency for over twenty years, and I know how it works. I have been running the real operations under the official operations. Now…”

“Does the president know about your real operations?” Doerr interrupted.

“No. They don’t need to know. Presidents and directors come and go. They are like showpieces. But the senators are there forever. Brushback and some senators and congressmen are aware of our operations. And they give us the cover and money when we need some. We are doing the real work to protect America. We are the real patriots.” Lazarus extended his hand. “Come join me. You will be really useful to our great country.”

Doerr turned, heading away from the parking lot; he did not want to listen to Lazarus anymore.

THE NIGHT WAS long and cold. Doerr’s mind moved back and forth like a pendulum. He knew the choices he was about to make could have grave consequences, not only for him but also for the people he loved.

He vacillated, not about whether he should take the offer made by Lazarus. The answer to that question was settled. He would turn Lazarus in, no matter what the consequence was.
Doerr was having trouble deciding who to go to – Stonewall or the president, or someone else. The downside of going to Stonewall was that if she were an involved party in the Samuel conspiracy, then she would throw him into the street and do everything to discredit him. Going to the president after that would be meaningless.
And if he went to the president directly, Stonewall would be pissed, and expectation of any shred of cooperation from her would be unreasonable. Besides, the president would surely ask for proof, and Doerr did not have any.
He stood in front of his hotel window and gazed at the stars, the lights in his room turned off, and he thought hard. What Lazarus had told him the night before was shocking. It was not like the agency double-crossed him for the first time. But what Lazarus had done was just preposterous. It was as if he was running a parallel agency of his own, and he did whatever suited him. A man like that should not go free. And Samuel had to be punished too. He decided what his next step would be.

“DO YOU HAVE any proof of what you just told me?” Stonewall asked, her face grim. She extended her hand, picked up the water bottle, unscrewed the cap, and took a sip. “Well?” She looked up.
Sitting across the large glass table, Doerr moved in his chair; he had spent the last half hour explaining everything Lazarus had told him the night before and everything that had happened to him in the last eight months.
Proof! Proof! Proof!
“Ask Faizan,” Doerr finally said. “He already told us Samuel is in their team.”
“What else?”
Doerr was thinking. Now he thought he should have had the voice recorder in his smartphone turned on when he was having the verbal melee with Lazarus.
The phone rang, and Stonewall picked it up, spoke for two minutes, and then turned back to Doerr. “What else?”

“Speak to the receptionist at the front desk? She was involved. She told me lies. Lazarus must have made her tell lies.”
“Ah-huh.” Stonewall nodded. “But which one, though? We have eighteen receptionists who work here.”
Debra or Dawn? The name surely started with D. He tried hard to remember. “Dawn, her first name was Dawn,” Doerr said.
“What else do you have?”
“The people at the Thirty-Third Street office.”
“You got any names?”
Doerr tried to remember the name of that man at the New York Thirty-Third Street office who had told him that Samuel did not work for the agency.
Steve, definitely Steve.
“Well?” Stonewall asked, and she held a sympathetic look.
“Steve. His name was Steve.”
“Okay, let me conduct an investigation. I will talk to Dawn, Steve and others. And you can take a few days off in the meantime. But don’t go away too far. I may need to talk to you.”
The conversation was over.

CHERRY TREES WERE blossoming in East Potomac Park, in Washington, DC, a place not too far from a memorial named after the third president Thomas Jefferson, considered to be the founding father of America. Senator Brushback met Lazarus in this park, under a large oak tree, facing the waters of the Potomac River.
“I think this is a fitting place for our meetings,” said Brushback, his face pointed down. “I feel as if our founding father is watching us, guiding us. I had many meetings here with senators, congressmen from both parties, and other important people of this town. I met most of them after I came to this town soon after becoming a congressman.”
“You became an important person in the organization,” Lazarus said. “And you rose through the ranks with a lightning speed, and now people are talking about you becoming the next president.”
“Yes,” said Brushback. “We held meetings here to decide what is good for America, to decide what it was that the president and his administration were not doing. We made sure those things were done. Sometimes we have

to make the tough decisions, like the one we made to terminate the DEA Administrator six months back. Remember? You were also here that day."
"Yes. How can I forget that day?" Lazarus sounded angry. "The decision made that day has brought me to *this*. I was going to retire from the agency with my head high, a fat pension. Publishers were reaching out to me for a book deal. But now, there is an investigation going on against me. I feel frustrated all the time and fearful sometimes, Senator."
"Don't worry. Things went wrong for us before, and we always recovered from them. I agree things have gone a bit too far this time. But I assure you – you will be fine. Just stay put and don't talk too much to anybody. That is an advice I'm giving you as a lawyer and as a friend. Trust me. Your troubles will end soon."
"I trust you, Senator, but sometimes I feel it is just too much to bear."
"Me and my friends will pull you out. But I think you should not have blurted out everything to that Max Doerr the way you said you did."
"I thought Max would be an easy recruit. He killed the DEA chief. He was in a compromising position. That's how we recruited many people. You know that. And I never thought Max would go to the director and tell her everything. I mean some agency operatives know many things. But they all keep their mouths shut. But this Max guy is different. He doesn't care."
"Yeah, Lazarus." Brushback started walking along the riverbank, and Lazarus closely followed him. They both stopped at the next tree. "You should have known the man better. Someday, I *will* take care of that Max Doerr. *The assassin* has to be assassinated. But for now, I will focus on getting you and Samuel out of the logjam."
"Thank you, Senator."
"And one more thing." Brushback faced Lazarus and made eye contact. "I understand you mentioned my name when you *talked* to Max Doerr. Right?"
"Right."
"Make sure you don't take any senator's name, including mine, during the investigation. In the worst scenario, if you go to jail, the next president will pardon you. I guarantee it. Make sure you mention no other name. Just you and Samuel did everything."
"Now suddenly we are talking about me going to jail?"
"No, I'm not talking about you going to jail. I am saying in case it happens. I will get you out, very soon."

“Mark my word, Senator,” Lazarus said ominously, “you better guarantee that I get into no trouble. If something bad happens to me, I will take everyone down.”

THE NEWSWOMAN ON the TV was speaking as loudly as she could. Doerr watched from his New York apartment, a few weeks later. The newswoman continued, “There has been an unbelievable development here at the White House. We have just learned that the FBI went down to Langley and arrested Deputy Director Lazarus West of the CIA. We also know that an operative has been taken into custody, and more arrests are certain to follow. These arrests are the result of a whistleblowing by an inside operative. The man’s name is a closely guarded secret. Many in Washington are now blaming the president for choosing a woman without military experience as the head of the CIA.”

The camera zoomed out, and a man appeared, wearing an overcoat. The newswoman asked the man, “Senator Brushback, what do you think of the recent development with the current administration?”

The man started speaking as the newswoman extended the microphone to his mouth. “I was one of the few who voted against Stonewall’s confirmation. As I have said many times before, under this president, cronyism has skyrocketed, and ineptitude has reached a new high.”

“What would you suggest the president do at this time?” the newswoman asked.

“I think Stonewall should resign immediately. If she does not do that, then the president should force her out and nominate someone with solid experience.”

“But the White House has already indicated that they want Stonewall to continue, and they have also pointed out that the crooks inside the CIA have been working with their own agenda long before Stonewall even took office.”

“I leave those details for the FBI to investigate. But my priority is to clean up the White House and clean up Washington because I love America too much.” The senator turned to leave.

The newswoman said, “Please stay tuned. After the break, we will talk to the Democrat Senate majority leader.”

Doerr rubbed his eyes. He could hardly believe that Stonewall was being blamed for everything. After listening to Doerr, she must have conducted her investigation and found out everything about Lazarus, Samuel, and the others. She had done an excellent job.

Doerr picked up the phone to thank Stonewall. But then he thought he should go over and thank her personally. He started getting ready for the five-hour drive to Langley.

TWO MONTHS LATER, walking through Times Square in the evening, relishing the thin crowd and thick air, the only thing Doerr could remember were the basketball games he had played with Billy last summer. The following day, it would be nine months since Billy's death. The temperature was warming, spring was near, and summer would follow.

His work was done. Samuel was languishing in jail; Halim's man Faizan had been stopped.

He took a few more steps and stood in front of the Java coffee shop where he had spent many hours over the years. Before entering the shop, he looked up. The stars in the sky were having their own party.

Stonewall had offered him a big promotion and told him that no one needed to know who had really murdered the DEA administrator. That information would always remain buried under a pile of classified documents.

But Doerr was not sure whether he should go back and work for the agency. He was not crazy about the idea. The manager from his old editing job had also called and offered a big jump in salary for him to come back, though Doerr was sure that it was not a job that he would do again.

MAX DOERR AND Gayle walked into their favorite steak restaurant on Forty-Second Street in Manhattan. The place was crowded, and more than thirty people were waiting for a table. But Doerr and Gayle were seated within five minutes; Doerr had called earlier to book a table.

Doerr ordered Heineken beer, and Gayle asked for some red wine.

After the drinks arrived, Doerr started sipping and looked at Gayle's beautiful face. She finished her wine quickly.

"Another one?" Doerr asked.

"No, one is enough for me."

“Why?”
“I gotta go work tomorrow. Also, I have to login and do some work tonight from home.”
“You’ve got to find a new job,” Doerr said, chuckling.
“Honestly, after seeing what you do for a living, I’m much more content with my job now.”
Doerr smiled and placed his beer bottle on the table. “I don’t do it for a living.”
“I know.” Gayle fidgeted with her empty wine glass. “Max, can I ask you a question?”
“Sure. Go ahead, hon.”
After a pause, she said, “Max, do you want a child?”
Doerr’s face became serious, and he kept staring at his beer bottle. He could see Billy’s hazy face there.
“I know it is hard for you. Sorry, we can talk about it later.”
“No,” Doerr said and raised his face. “I have been thinking about myself only. I should be the one saying sorry.”
“I’m saying it only because I’ll be thirty-seven next month. And I’m not getting younger.”
“Let’s go ahead.” Doerr wanted the baby for her, no matter how difficult it was for him. “I want a child too,” he said to make her feel good.
“Are you ready with your order?” the young male server asked.
“Yes.” Doerr ordered a medium-rare steak.
“For me, a grilled chicken sandwich,” said Gayle, “and some salad.”
Doerr gave her a glance.
“I have to work tonight,” she said. “So I want something light.”
Doerr nodded, and the server noted down the order and left.
Gayle leaned forward and said, “So, tell me, Max. What’s going on?”
“About what?”
“About all the people you worked within the last one or two months.”
Doerr looked around. Though there were a lot of diners around, everyone was busy with their drinks, food and talking. There was loud music. So even if someone wanted to eavesdrop, it would be hard for them to listen.
“Samuel and Lazarus are in jail,” Doerr said. “I told you that. The prosecutors are preparing the case against them. Same with Faizan. He has agreed to take a life sentence to avoid the death penalty.”

“What about Irene Clark? The woman who died in her Fifth Avenue condo. I know you were sure Samuel killed her. But did the FBI find out anything?”
“As a matter of fact, yes. Two of the guns left in her condo were tied to Samuel. Samuel had burnt off the serial numbers. But with the latest technology, the FBI found out the numbers. Even though the number was gone, it left an impression in the metal layer below. It is amazing nowadays what all they can do.”
“What happened to the professor? I felt bad about the way he was treated by the government.”
“He has been released. FBI apologized to him. His relatives are now asking him to file a lawsuit and demand monetary compensation.”
“Is he going to?”
“I think he is mulling about it but he has not filed a lawsuit yet. I feel bad for him. I know how hard it is to lose your only child.” Doerr let out a deep sigh. “It is like you don’t want to live anymore. The professor is a great man. It proves that there is nothing wrong in Islam religion. It’s that some people interpret it the wrong way. I myself have read about a third of the Koran and find that there isn’t much difference between Islam and Christian religions. Do you know that the Koran considers Jesus to be a son of God and Abraham an angel?”
“Really? I didn’t know that.”
“In fact the fourteenth sura of the Koran says.”
“Okay Max,” Gayle interrupted. “I get it. The Koran never taught anyone to hate the Christians or anybody else. Now tell me about Regina? Have you talked to her since you left her in Dubai?”
“Yes, I have talked to her a few times. She’s fine. She’s taking some time off, just like me.”
“So you talked to her a *few times*?” She wore a smirk on her face.
Doerr pressed the beer bottle to his lips and nodded.
“Is she beautiful?” she asked.
“She is good-looking. I won’t say beautiful. You *are* beautiful.”
Gayle was about to say something, but the server came back with their food and started laying the plates on the table.

SENATOR BRUSHBACK AND Ross Calpone met at East Potomac Park, under the same oak tree where the senator had met Lazarus not too long ago. Both men wore black overcoats and large hats, though the temperature was in the mid-sixties. The garments were probably worn as a disguise. Both men faced the water, and Ross Calpone spoke first. “So how do we take care of this?”

“There is no we here,” Brushback said. “You are going to take care of Lazarus and Samuel. We can’t have two loose cannons sitting in jail, ready to burst out anytime and spill our secrets.”

“Did you guys try convincing the president for a pardon?”

“We tried. But this president is stubborn. He has already agreed to informally recommend you for the deputy director post. We can’t pressure him for too many things. And also, the future is more important than the past. *You* have to take care of Lazarus and Samuel. You know what I mean, don’t you?”

Ross Calpone nodded and appreciated what the senator had done for him. If Brushback was not there for him, Ross would be working for the CIA with a meager salary and occupying a tiny cubicle at Langley. “Should I hire a mafia hitman,” Ross asked the senator. “Or send some of our agency soldiers for this job?”

“I leave that up to you. Make your decision. After all, you will be making very big choices very soon. But I will tell you one thing.” The senator paused.

“What is that?”

“Make it the same day.”

“Make what on the same day?” Ross asked.

“In our world we don’t spell out everything, Ross. We don’t say stuff that can get us into trouble, even if there is no recorder turned on. So I say one more time – make it the same day.” The senator turned and started walking away. “We talk with wink and clink. Get used to it.”

Bemused, Ross Calpone kept thinking what the senator meant. Within a minute, Ross figured it out.

He cursed himself. Why did he not understand it immediately after the senator had said it? Ross was mad at himself. How could he be so stupid? Maybe his dad had been right when he had called Ross ‘the dumb one’ repeatedly during his middle school years.

Ross wanted to apologize to the senator. But Brushback was gone. Ross ran to the parking area.

Both the senator and his black Lincoln sedan were gone.

Ross started walking back to his car.

Yes, Lazarus and Samuel had to be taken out the same day. Ross knew if one was killed before the other, the other might see what was coming and spill the beans. That could not be allowed.

Taking out both Lazarus and Samuel, who were in different jails, on the same day would be a little hard to do. But Ross knew exactly how to do it.

EPILOGUE

Doerr received an urgent message from Director Stonewall, asking him to come and see her at Langley immediately. At first, he was unwilling. After Gayle encouraged him to go, only then, he decided to head for Langley, grudgingly.

Stonewall greeted Doerr in her office. She wore a black pants suit and looked cheerful. Doerr knew that she was working twelve hours a day, six days a week, as she was yet to appoint a new deputy director after Lazarus had been relieved of his duties.

After pleasantries, she asked, “How is your shoulder, Max? Is the pain still there?”

“Pain is life,” Doerr said. “It is still there. But I’ve learned to live with it. My therapist says it may take another six months for the pain to go away completely. Doctor gave me pain meds. But most of the time I just ignore the ache.”

“Good. And how is Gayle doing?” Stonewall asked.

“She’s okay. She was rattled to see my injury at first. But she is okay now.”

“Excellent. You know both Lazarus and Samuel died in jail, attacked by fellow inmates,” Stonewall said. “It is sad, but maybe that’s what they deserved.”

“Yes. I heard about it,” Doerr said. “It is a little bit odd that the two died the same day and also at about the same time. Is the agency investigating the murders?”

“No, we are not. FBI is. We have better things to do, Max. Moreover, it is their jurisdiction.”

“Something tells me there is more to it.”

“Like what?”

“Like someone sitting behind, controlling things.”

“Do you have a name?” Stonewall asked.

“I just feel there is a controller out there, managing things. Lazarus mentioned Senator Brushback’s name. He said some senators gave him the money and covered for what he was doing.”

“Max, that is not possible. Both Lazarus and Samuel said repeatedly during the investigations that it was just the two of them who did all those bad things. And no one else was involved,” Stonewall said smilingly. “I think

you are little bit paranoid. And I can’t blame you. Sometimes it happens when you go through a great personal loss.”
Doerr knew there was a force behind what Samuel and Lazarus did. But he could not prove it. He didn’t have a lead. So he let it go.
“Have you decided who our next deputy director of operations will be?” Doerr asked.
“Yes. I am almost decided that Ross Calpone is going to be the next deputy.”
Doerr was surprised. He had worked with Calpone some time back, and he did not like Calpone one bit. Doerr felt Ross Calpone was inept and sometimes downright lazy. “Do you think he is the right person to lead operations?”
“No, I don’t. But more than half of the Senate Intelligence Committee members favor him. And tens of congressmen from both parties have called me and urged me to choose Ross Calpone for the post. And recently even the White House has expressed their preference for him.”
“But isn’t it completely your choice as to who the next deputy director will be?”
“Yes, it is. But you know how it is in Washington. You can have a couple of foes, but you don’t want half the town to be your enemy.”
“I feel some of America’s worst enemies are living right here in Washington,” said Doerr.
“You’re probably right. But maybe there is something in Ross Calpone that I don’t understand. I hope I will find out soon. Now let’s talk about some work, shall we?”
Doerr hated Washington politics. It was the reason why he had left the CIA years back. He was willing to talk about work rather than the bickering among the politicians.
“Okay,” he said.
“Good.” Stonewall lifted a manila folder from the table and handed it to Doerr. “Read this and then tell me if you want to take up this job.”
Doerr took the file, looked at it and looked back at Stonewall’s expressionless face.
He opened the file and started reading.
Thanks to the secrets spilled by Faizan Al-Sourie and the good work of Max Doerr and Regina Rosania, the CIA could observe Abu Halim’s actions up close. Abu Halim’s hiring activity increased recently, and he was sending

terrorist trainees in droves to Somalia and Syria. The CIA had never actually been able to locate Abu Halim in real time until about two weeks ago. The agency had a lucky break. Abu Halim was located near Galcaio, in the Gudug region of Somalia. He was hunkered down in a house with several associates. An hour and thirty-three minutes after the sighting, a missile from a CIA drone was fired at the house, killing Abu Halim instantly.

Latest communications suggest that Abu Halim's brother, Raafiq Halim, has taken over Abu Halim's organization, and he is trying to hire new trainees. The agency leadership is very worried and would like to see Raafiq Halim assassinated quietly as soon as possible before he becomes a problem like Abu Halim. They also think that the only person, who could do this without creating a problem, is Max Doerr, the assassin.

Doerr raised his face. Stonewall was waiting for an answer.

"So if I decide to work," said Doerr, "I will have to report to Ross Calpone?"

"No. *You* will work directly for me."

"I will discuss it with my family and get back to you soon," Doerr said and rose to leave.

He walked out of Stonewall's office and sauntered through the hallway. He saw the old office where Lazarus used to sit. The memories of the archaic operations crowded his mind. He was livid that another inept person would be occupying that office soon.

As Doerr trudged out of the building and walked to the parking lot, he considered the work Stonewall had offered. He was familiar with the revulsion of death, but he knew some deaths, like Raafiq's, were a necessity. As he opened the door of his vehicle, he made the decision.

He turned the ignition on, called Gayle from his cell phone and said, "I have to leave for Dubai in a few days. I have a job to do that should take no more than a week or two. And this time, please come with me."

"I would love to come with you," Gayle said. "But I have to get some time off from my work first."

THE END

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CONTRIVED (US Link) (UK Link)

If you liked this book, please leave a review comment at amazon.com here(US link) or here(UK link).

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AN EXCERPT FROM THE SCIENTIST

Prologue Nevada, USA

A feeble metallic noise came from the iron bars of his prison cell, which sounded more like a song to sixty-two-year-old Jon Janco, a former nuclear scientist serving a thirty-year sentence for selling nuclear secrets to a foreign government. Janco sat up on his bed and looked at the two masked men standing right outside his cell just like they had promised.

Janco thought the men were like two tires of a bicycle, representing hope, about to carry him into freedom, far away from the jail life he'd been living for the last two years and three months.

"Get some good sleep before the big day," the guys had told him last night, and Janco had tried but to no avail. Was it the tension or was it the hope of breathing fresh morning air after rotting in the slammer for so long?

He could not tell, and it didn't matter now.

Janco saw the short man insert an iron wire into the lock. Holding his breath, Janco watched, and a minute later, the lock clicked open.

It is happening. Janco felt exulted.

David Taylor, the short guy, opened the door slowly, without making any noise, and Roger Gibbs, the tall man, entered Janco's cell and set his foot on the cold, cracked concrete floor.

"You ready?" Gibbs asked Janco.

Janco nodded.

Taylor handed Janco a black pantyhose. "Put this on and let's move."

Janco put the pantyhose over his head like an obedient servant.

"Now come," Taylor said and stepped out of the cell.

Janco and Gibbs followed Taylor. Janco turned his head to take one last peek at his dilapidated cell, and then he started stepping into the hallway with the two men, passing by the cells where inmates were sound asleep. Only a few lightbulbs were turned on, throwing just enough light to see things, a perfect condition for a jail escape.

Following the two men, Janco took a right turn and froze; he could see a guard dozing on a chair at the main gate. Gibbs and Taylor had told Janco last night, "No security guy will be there, and the door will be unlocked."

Instinctively, all three men stepped to the side wall and pressed their backs against it; the pillar in the front protected them from any look the guard

might take.
“He wasn’t supposed to be there,” Taylor, the short man, whispered.
“Not sure what happened,” Gibbs said, shaking his head. “I was told all of them had been paid off.”
Now Janco regretted agreeing with these two men for an escape when they had approached him a few weeks back. “We have been sent by Iran,” the tall man had said.
Janco had doubts. The two men appeared to be Caucasians, but then some Iranians did look like Caucasians, and it had been a worthy shot to avoid twenty-eight more years in the penitentiary.
Janco knew he would certainly die in prison someday if he stayed.
Now, with a hindrance right at the first step of the rendezvous, Janco was having second thoughts.
“Should I go back to my cell?” Janco asked Gibbs.
“Are you crazy?” Gibbs said dismissively. “Too late for that.”
After a few moments of silence, feeling frustrated, Janco said, “Maybe you didn’t pay enough bribe.”
“Shut up,” Gibbs said and turned to Taylor.
“There is an alternate route, but” – Gibbs jerked his head toward Janco – “I don’t think that ass can climb the fence.”
Trying to glance at the guard, Taylor poked his head out and then said to Gibbs, “I think he’s just sleeping. Maybe we can pass by.”
“You think so?” Gibbs stuck his head out and tried to look at the guard.
“You may be right. It’s worth a shot. We have to make it today; otherwise all the planning goes astray.”
“Right,” said Taylor.
Gibbs started rushing toward the main door of the jail and made a hand gesture for Janco and Taylor to follow him. Three masked men marched toward the gate. As they got closer, it was apparent that the guard was sleeping, his sleepy head tilted to the right.
“He’s snoring,” Taylor said, standing about ten feet from the guard.
“Let’s go,” Gibbs said and walked up to the gate that was made of thick iron plates and tried to open it. He shook his head; the gate was locked.
Janco knew after crossing through this door they would have to trot across the yard and face another gate, a taller and wider one. If they could get through that one, only then could Janco breathe free air, a big *if* now. Janco

understood someone had paid off the jail officials to lock all the inmates except the three, leave the two main doors open, and then depart.
But apparently something had gone wrong.
Someone didn't do his job, or someone wasn't paid enough.
"Now what?" Taylor barked at Gibbs.
"Give me those keys." Gibbs pointed at the guard, a thirty-plus man with a large bald head. A bunch of keys attached to a ring hung from the chair's handle.
Taylor approached the man, who was still snoring. Taylor picked up the keys and gently threw them to Gibbs. Gibbs caught the bunch and inserted one key into the lock. The door didn't budge, so Gibbs tried a few more keys.
Suddenly the man opened his eyes, stood up and screamed, "Stop."
The ongoing noise must have woken him up.
Janco watched the guard unhook his holster, about to take out his gun.
Taylor lunged at the man, and the gun dropped to the floor. Taylor grabbed the guard's neck with his muscled hands and held him in a choke hold. The man tried to free himself, but his efforts were proving futile. Taylor held his arms tighter and looked at Gibbs for confirmation of something.
Gibbs nodded.
Taylor twisted the guard's neck with great force, and soon the hapless man's body dropped to the floor, and it appeared the guard was dead.
Janco had heard about many murders from other inmates. Some had given him graphic details of how they had done it, to which Janco had listened with feigned interest. But he had never thought he would watch a killing.
"C'mon." Gibbs tried a few more keys in the lock and wiggled them.
Finally, one key turned all the way.
Janco could hear some inmates shouting, kicking on their cells' doors, perhaps woken by the cacophony of beating the guard.
"Let's go," Taylor said and started moving. Janco followed.
Gibbs shook his head and mumbled, "They made a screwed-up plan."
Janco wondered who exactly were *they*? But the thought vanished as the alarms started blaring and the lights flashed everywhere around.
Gibbs crossed the door and started running across the yard where Janco had played basketball many times. Gibbs screamed, "Come on, Jon. We have less than five minutes before they come grab us."

As Janco ran, he felt weakness in his legs. He was five feet eight inches tall and weighed one hundred and forty-five pounds after losing twenty pounds in the last three years.
Gibbs stopped at the main gate, tried a few keys, and the door opened like a faithful dog.
Janco stepped out of the jail for the first time, and as he felt the air of freedom, strength returned to his feet.
“Hurry,” said Gibbs, and the three men started running along the slender road right outside the jailhouse.
Soon, they were on the main road, where a pearl green compact car was waiting. The passenger-side door flung open, and Gibbs got inside. Janco and Taylor entered the vehicle and sat in the rear seats.
A woman was in the driver’s seat. Janco surmised her age was a tad above thirty. She started the car’s ignition, and the vehicle started moving.
Taylor leaned forward and asked Gibbs, “You think we should call them and let them know the guard’s situation?”
“No,” said Gibbs. “Not now.”
Janco peered outside. The sun was yet to come up, but the view was soothing to his eyes.

BOOK 1

Chapter 1

Amsterdam

Max Doerr, the CIA assassin, was getting ready for work. It was a cloudy morning; the little ducks were moving around quietly, and he saw some swans searching for food. Doerr pulled the blinds on both the windows in his hotel room and put on a pair of shorts and a white T-shirt to make him look like a typical American tourist, but his purpose was to hunt down the man who had sucked all the happiness from his life. At six feet four inches, two hundred twenty pounds, not a shred of unnecessary fat in his body, he was physically strong and mentally ready for the hunt.
In the right pocket of his shorts, he tucked in a Glock 27, a preferable choice when stealth was more important, with a short barrel and easy to conceal. In Doerr’s parlance, he called it a tank. He could take any target down with it from a reasonable distance. Many in his profession preferred a Glock 23, a gun with more precision, a heavier caliber bullet and a longer barrel. But for Doerr the precision was in his hands, brain, and the endless

amount of time he had spent with his firearms – not in the length of a barrel. He was one of the best shooters the CIA ever produced.
In the other pocket of his shorts, he placed a magazine with additional bullets, a Swiss knife, and an encrypted smartphone. He put on a pair of white sneakers and then waited for a text message from his handler. No text message came for five minutes, which meant the agency folks didn't have a visual of the target. There had been reliable intel that Rafan, the target, was in Amsterdam to carry out a transaction. So the CIA had spread the word around, extended its tentacles to locate Rafan, and sent their best assassin – Max Doerr.
Unable to just wait in his room, Doerr closed the door of his hotel room and proceeded to the elevator. Once inside, he pressed the button marked G and tried to create an image of Rafan's body in his brain – five feet four inches tall, almost a foot shorter than Doerr, broad shoulders and a medium belly. Last time Rafan had been located, he wore a thin beard, which was probably gone by now or maybe he'd put on a thick and long beard to make him look older, like a mullah.
Doerr walked through the hotel lobby, visually scanned the area out of habit, pushed the revolving main door of the hotel, and then stood at the curbside for a cab. He took out his smartphone to check for the text message – nothing.
The concierge came up. "Need taxi?"
Doerr nodded as he put the phone back in his pocket. A silver-colored cab, TCA written on its top, pulled up. The concierge opened the gate, and Doerr sat down in the rear seat, and the cab started moving slowly.
"Van Gogh Museum," Doerr said, and the cabbie nodded.
"You from America," the cabbie asked as the vehicle picked up speed and overtook a tiny white electric car.
"Yes," said Doerr and looked outside through the window glass.
"I know people. As soon as I see someone, I know where they're from."
"I see that," Doerr said grudgingly.
"I'm Thyagi. From Sri Lanka. I came here to study engineering."
"Then what happened?"
"Don't like engineer work, so I started driving. This way I see places."
"Good point."
"What do you do?" the cabbie asked, the most annoying question for Doerr.

It was a question he'd been asked a million times, so he had an answer ready. "I run a business."
Most people were happy with that reply but not this cabbie.
"What kind of business?"
"I buy and sell pianos." This wasn't too far from the truth. He had bought and sold pianos many times though not for money. Playing piano was his hobby, and he had upgraded his instrument many times, sometimes just because he was bored with the older one.
"You see, I used to play pianos," the cabbie shouted, making sure Doerr heard every word. "I played many types of pianos."
Thirty minutes later, Doerr entered the art museum that contained the best collection of works by Van Gogh, the Dutch Post-Impressionist painter from the late nineteenth century, Doerr's favorite artist, who had died from a gunshot at the age of only thirty-seven. Many believed the painter committed suicide, but Doerr thought that wasn't the case. Why would a man of immense creativity destroy his own life?
"Do you need a tour?" someone asked, breaking his train of thought.
Doerr shook his head. He knew enough about Van Gogh, and this was the fourth time Doerr had visited this museum. He put his pouch with the gun inside a locker in the museum and then took the elevator to the top floor.
Doerr took his smartphone out, expecting a text – nothing.
So he sent a text to his handler: "Has the bird left town?"
Within minutes, he received a text back: "No report of leaving."
Doerr texted: "Is the bird spotted in the city at all?"
A reply text came back: "We have been bird-watching. But not spotted in the city yet."
Doerr: "Then how do you know the bird even reached Amsterdam?"
Reply: "We don't. Per the source, bird came to town yesterday."
Doerr: "Who is the source?"
After a delay of two minutes, the reply came back: "The source's reliability is as high as the fee we paid to secure the info. Hang on. You'll see the bird soon."
Doerr didn't send any more texts; he knew it was best to leave them alone and let them do their work while he waited for his moment. Doerr put his smartphone back into his pocket and proceeded to the third floor of the museum. He enjoyed art for an hour and then headed for the cafeteria and ordered a cheeseburger.

He stood in the pickup line, waiting for his food to arrive, three other customers ahead of him. He watched the first customer take a tray full of burgers and fries. And that was when he felt a vibration in his pocket. He pulled out his smartphone.

A text message was waiting: “Bird sighted in flower shop in Westerpark.” Doerr’s body went into alert mode immediately. Another text came with the address of the flower shop. Luckily the place wasn’t too far, ten minutes’ cab ride. Doerr left the cafeteria without waiting for his burger. As he ran down the stairs, his phone buzzed again. This time, it was a phone call from the handler.

“Yes,” said Doerr into his phone.

“A cab will be waiting at the museum. Its plate number ends in 124. Get inside the cab.”

“I need to hire a cab myself.” Doerr had faced this situation before. The agency always wanted to use its own vehicle, more transparency, and better control. But Doerr wanted to hire his own ride, giving him the control.

“Why?” the handler barked. “Our cab is fitted with a radio and multiple monitors. You know it’s better. Don’t argue with me.”

“I don’t need a radio or monitor as long as you or somebody is online, answering my questions. Sometimes your vehicles are bugged, or the instruments hacked into.”

Doerr picked up the pouch with his gun from the locker and was approaching the museum’s main door. “Besides, I won’t have time to stare at some fancy monitor.”

“It’s a protocol defined by the top bosses, Doerr. We don’t want you to shoot from a cab and see the cabbie giving an interview on a TV channel an hour later. See my point now?”

“I won’t be doing anything like that from inside a taxi,” Doerr whispered as he walked out of the museum. He could see a cab approaching; its plate number was SJT-124. From outside it appeared like an ordinary cab.

Doerr detested the CIA when they tried to control the whole shebang. But he recognized it was pointless to argue with the handler. The time lost might prove crucial later. The cab stopped where Doerr was standing, and Doerr hung up the phone, entered the cab, and sat on the passenger seat. As the vehicle moved slowly away from the museum, the cabbie pressed a button on the dashboard. All the meter displays went dark, and the dashboard

turned into a monitor displaying a video feed showing the front of a flower shop.
“That’s the shop where Rafan is right now.” The handler’s voice came up on the radio.
“How long has he been in there?” Doerr asked.
“Two to three minutes, I would say.”
“And how many minutes is it going to take for us to reach there?”
“I would say five to ten,” the handler replied. “But confirm with your driver.”
Doerr looked at the driver, who gave a meaningful nod of agreement – yeah, it should take about five to ten minutes.
Doerr set his eyes on the road; traffic was thin. At one p.m., the rush period was a few hours away. The cab passed two vehicles and allowed four more to pass; it could certainly use a bit more speed.
“Can’t we go faster?” Doerr said to the cabbie. The man made a hand gesture in reply, indicating that a cop might be present on the roadside, armed with a speed-checking device.
Doerr wondered if the driver was a mute. If he were, then that was perhaps a good choice on the agency’s part. A silenced cabbie would not be able to give interviews to the TV stations.
Three minutes passed. Keeping an eye on the monitor, Doerr asked the handler, “Does the shop have a back door?”
“Not sure. If it does, then it opens to another road.”
Doerr was in a quandary now. Should he head for the road in front of the shop or the back? “Do you have someone near the shop’s entrance?” Doerr asked.
“No. There is a guy standing opposite the shop. The video you’re seeing is coming through his wristwatch.”
Obviously the agency had hired someone to stand there, wearing a watch with a tiny camera pointed at the shop’s front door.
“The cab will drop you five hundred feet away from the shop,” the handler said. “There is no surveillance there, so the cab will simply drive away while you take care of business and vanish from the site on your own. Understood?”
“Understood.” It was standard procedure. Doerr didn’t need much help, the less, the better. “I want to go to the back entrance of the shop.”

“Why?” The handler sounded irritated. “I see no reason for the bird to exit via the back door.”
“I’ve got a good feeling that he’ll come through the back. These guys always take precautions. Now tell the driver to go to the back road. Looks like he takes orders from you only. We have someone at the front anyway.”
“No way. The guy at the front is an unarmed civilian. He can’t do much. Go to the *front*.”
Doerr knew there was no point arguing with the handler.
Seven minutes had passed since leaving the museum. Doerr made a hand gesture to the driver, asking him to go to the back. The driver shook his head forcefully. He wouldn’t listen.
A minute later, Doerr could see the flower shop and spotted the young man standing in an awkward position so that the camera on his wristwatch pointed to the shop.
The cab stopped after the ten-minute ride from the museum, and Doerr got out of the vehicle and trudged to the shop. Ten minutes were way too long. Rafan was probably out already. Within seconds, Doerr was inside the shop. The flowers in the shop were arranged in three rows. One row had yellow tulips, the second one had red, and the third row contained all the other flowers. Regardless of color, the most expensive ones were kept in the back row. At the front, there were many boxes, one stacked on another. Doerr knew those were packaged flowers to be picked up by couriers, waiting to be shipped across the globe.
Doerr visually checked the shop and then rushed to the back – no Rafan. He knew he should have hired a private cab from the street and used that thousand euro cash he had in his back pocket. That way he would have arrived at the shop early. The agency’s driver couldn’t afford to speed up and get apprehended by a local cop, who might have decided to check out the vehicle and discover all the high-tech gizmos; that would be scandalous. Doerr was sure that Rafan would not wait in the shop for ten minutes. Rafan would make the transaction as quickly as he could and then make a hasty exit. Doerr rushed to the shop’s back door, opened it, and stepped outside. He looked right and then left. No Rafan, no human. He saw a black cat, which fled swiftly.
An employee of the shop, a middle-aged bald man, rushed to Doerr. “Do you need any help, sir?”

“I was supposed to meet someone here,” Doerr lied. “Did you see a short stocky Middle Eastern man who came here alone?”
The employee thought for a few seconds and then asked thoughtfully, “With little bit of gray hair at the front?”
“Yes. Yes. Was he here?”
“In fact, yes.” The employee smiled. “He was here a minute ago. He ordered a bunch of flowers to be delivered.”
“Really? Can you show me the delivery address?”
“No.” The employee’s face turned serious. “We can’t give away customers’ information.”
“The thing is” – Doerr pulled out a hundred-euro bill – “my friend was probably sending a present to a common friend. Today is the friend’s birthday. But the friend has moved to a different place.” Doerr told a bunch of lies and handed the euro bill to the employee. “Can I see the delivery address?”
“Why didn’t you say it was your friend?” The smile returned to the employee’s face as he took the cash. “Come this way, please.” The man headed for the cash register. He pulled out a notebook. “Room number 436, Hotel Marina. Kattengat 12, 1019 SZ Amsterdam. Is that the right address?”
“Yes. That is the right address. Thank you.”
Doerr briskly exited the shop. After walking about a hundred feet, he pulled out his smartphone and called his handler.
“What happened?” the handler asked.
“First check this address. Hotel Marina. Kattengat 12, 1019 SZ Amsterdam.” The address had been imprinted in Doerr’s brain as soon as the shop employee had uttered it. “Tell me where it is.” Doerr waited as his heart pulsed higher. He had a thin hope that Rafan had given his address or his friend’s. Then Doerr could nail Rafan.
“I just checked. That address is nonexistent. Now tell me what happened in that flower shop.”
Doerr gave him a brief gist of it.
“I don’t know why Rafan gave a false address for the flower delivery,” said the handler.
“It’s a ploy to slow down the pursuer,” Doerr said. “I think we could get him today if I could hire my own cab.”
Doerr was frustrated because Rafan wasn’t an ordinary target. He was the man who had sucked the happiness from Doerr’s life.

Chapter 2 Rome, Italy

A year and three months ago…Max Doerr was a very happy man that day. His month-long assignment in Italy was complete, and he was waiting for his wife, Gayle, to come and join him in the historic city of Rome. He was thinking about her and could almost smell the lavender fragrance of her hair. He could visualize her hazel eyes that he never tired of gazing at. The chauffeured CIA sedan took him to Leonardo da Vinci airport.

Heading back to the hotel, inside the sedan, Gayle curled into a cocoon and rested her head against his chest. "When can we go to the Colosseum?" she asked.

"You're tired," Doerr said. "Let's go there tomorrow."

"I think you are tired, Max. I'm not," Gayle said with her usual smile. "Today we go. Come on, life is short."

The sedan turned right, and the hotel was barely five hundred feet away, and that was when it happened.

First an ear-piercing explosion; then the car tilted to the left. He extended his hands to protect Gayle, but his head hit the roof. He smelled smoke; the memory of what happened next was blurred. Waking up in a hospital, all he remembered was Gayle's face.

"You've been in a coma for four days," said the nurse.

He tried to look around. "Where is Gayle?"

The nurse sighed, and her chin dropped. He felt his heart collapsing and body sinking.

Plenty of sunlight was coming inside the tiny hospital room when he woke up again. Soft music was coming from somewhere, but no one was around. He knew he was alone, truly alone. A few years back, his son had been murdered in New York, and now Gayle was gone. The last words from her mouth – life is short.

Everything felt meaningless, and Gayle's last words echoed in his heart. Why her. Why? Why? Why?

In the next two months, his weight dropped by fifteen pounds. At night, he couldn't remember if he ate his lunch and didn't want to have dinner. He stopped drinking coffee because it brought Gayle's memory. He started smoking occasionally.

He didn't report for duty and wouldn't return calls left by the CIA folks.

That changed when he heard a message left by CIA Director Alison Stonewall on his cell phone, explaining who had killed Gayle – Rafan Sohail.

Chapter 3 California

That woman is crazy, Janco thought. She was driving at ninety miles an hour in a sixty-five zone.
"Perhaps there are cops," Janco mumbled, worried that his newly attained freedom might end abruptly just because that woman drove too fast.
"Chill," the woman said. "I got a radar."
Sitting next to him, Taylor gave him a *shut up* look.
While the car raced forward, Janco looked around. The sun was rising, and a view of the horizon soothed his eyes though his heart fluttered from the uncertainty that lay ahead. The land around was barren, only a few cactus plants visible here and there.
Janco tried to savor everything he saw, but after an hour he was bored. He closed his eyes, hoping for some sleep, but the bumpy ride in the compact car was making it hard.
Later, the sun was up, scorching the land. Janco leered at the distant hills. It had been over two years since he had seen something like this. He'd spent a little over two years in the penitentiary, twenty-eight more years left to serve.
Janco had been found guilty of treason and selling secrets to a foreign government for money. In his mind, the charges had been preposterous. The information he'd given away to Iran was owned by him and couldn't be used to make nuclear weapons. But the prosecutor had argued that his research was funded by the government and the secrets he'd passed were critical for nuclear bomb-making.
His lawyer had argued one could not make a pipe bomb with the info he had passed on to the Iranians, let alone a nuclear one. But the jury had agreed with the prosecutor and found Janco guilty as charged.
"Four to eight years is what you're looking at," his lawyer had assured him. "With good behavior you might be out in two."
But when the fat, melon-headed federal judge had given the sentence, Janco was stunned – thirty years. He wanted to jump and smash that melon. But he knew that would lead to more trouble; after all, Janco was an educated

man with two PhDs in his pocket. Many lawyers and journalists had opined the thirty-year sentence was overkill. There was even an op-ed in *The Washington Post* calling the sentence too harsh.

Janco had started to serve his sentence in a Virginia penitentiary. At first it was surreal, but within months he'd adjusted to the reality and was able to move on with his new life, befriending many inmates, who had committed serious crimes, including murder.

Three months into his criminal trial, his ex-wife had filed for divorce. He'd had to hire a family lawyer to deal with it. On top of everything, his ex-wife had his bank account frozen, putting more stress on him. He'd felt if he could have focused on his criminal trial, maybe he'd have been acquitted or at least received a lighter sentence. It had all been the fault of that whore.

After six months into his prison term, his only relation outside the jail was Mark, the elder of his two sons, who used to send occasional emails. His younger son never cared.

In the prison, Janco had met thugs, murderers, rapists, and one crime boss. Some inmates espoused their innocence, and some bragged about murders they didn't commit.

He'd tried to be friendly with them. He thought of them as people with special skills, just like his own skill in science. He'd tolerated stale food for two years. During summer, his cell used to get so hot that many times he'd thought he was having a heart attack.

And then he had seen those two men, Taylor and Gibbs, who had introduced themselves as agents sent by Iran's government. Gibbs was the tall man and Taylor short; both were muscled and had a thuggish appearance. They talked to Janco in a corner of the yard, no other inmate in earshot.

"We can get you outta here," Gibbs had said, and Taylor nodded and looked around, making sure no one was paying them any attention.

"Where do I go from here?" Janco asked, covering his lips with his hand. "Feds will hound me down."

"We'll take you out of this country."

Janco had thought for two seconds. "Who sent you?"

"The Iranians," Gibbs had whispered and Taylor nodded. "Think about it. You can live in Europe or South America or wherever you want. They'll give you the money. You have twenty-eight years left here. You *will* die here."

“I’ll think about it.”
“We don’t have much time,” Gibbs said. “We need to know by tomorrow morn.”
The three men had dispersed, and that night Janco had turned left-right-left in his bed – no sleep, just like his first days on that bed.
Things can go bad. Don’t really know where they would take me. I might die on the way. But then I might die here. I’m over sixty already.
The next morning Janco had said *yes*.

THE COMPACT CAR rumbled along the highway, cutting through the hot, dry air. They were moving straight, stopping only for short bathroom breaks, picking up junk food. Janco wanted a cheeseburger and some fries at one rest area with a food court.
“You’ll have plenty of time to eat good food later,” Gibbs balked. “Now isn’t the time.”
Janco got the point and munched dry potato chips for lunch in the car. Out of jail, still freedom felt a light-year away. His heart quivered at the uncertainty lying ahead. Janco peered outside. Soon he should be out of America, away from the FBI’s reach, away from anybody’s grip. He didn’t know where he was going. Gibbs had said somewhere in Europe or South America. He looked at Gibbs, who was sitting in the passenger seat now. Janco wanted to ask him – where?
Neither Gibbs nor Taylor had been talking to him much since breaking out of the jail. Janco decided not to ask the question, for now. *I’m free, I’m free* – he told himself repeatedly.
Janco saw a *Welcome to California* sign. Having lived on the East Coast most of the time, he wasn’t familiar with this part of the country. Then he saw a sign – Los Angeles 190 miles.
Los Angeles Airport, the destination wasn’t too far away, and the way the woman was driving, they might reach LA in just one more hour. It was near noon, and the sun was bright. Janco thought he was on his way to the Los Angeles airport, and very soon he’d be out of the country.
But ten minutes later, Gibbs pointed to a sign with some motel names on it and said, “We get off here.”
Janco wanted to ask why, but he kept the question to himself.

The car turned off the highway onto a local road, and a few minutes later, it stopped at a nondescript motel. It had a bright neon light sign – *va ancy*. The C light wasn't working. A McDonald's restaurant could be seen from the vehicle. From the number of cars parked in the motel parking lot, Janco estimated that the motel was about twenty percent full.
Gibbs got out of the vehicle. "You guys stay here." He slammed the door and then went into the motel office.
A few minutes later, Gibbs returned with some keys. He gave one to the woman and said to Taylor, "We all will stay in one room."
Janco understood that Gibbs and Taylor would be staying in the same room with Janco, to keep an eye on him. Everybody got out of the vehicle.
Wondering what the plan was, Janco looked at Gibbs. Gibbs's smiley face he'd seen in the jail was gone now, replaced by a face full of disdain.
"I have *one* question?" Janco asked politely, knowing that Gibbs was his protector and possibly his owner as well. If Gibbs left him now, he'd be like a lion cub left alone in the Serengeti desert.
Gibbs said nothing and simply kept marching toward the wooden stairs covered by a green carpet.
Taking that as a *yes* answer, Janco asked, "When am I going to the LA airport?"
"Tomorrow," said Gibbs as he started climbing the stairs.
So Gibbs confirmed that he'd indeed be going to Los Angeles.
Janco followed Gibbs to the second floor. "Where is my passport?"
Gibbs stopped, turned to face Janco, and rudely said, "I thought you had just one question?"
"Sorry."
"It's being arranged. Now keep your fucking mouth shut. Will be good for everyone." Gibbs started walking again.
That was the first time Gibbs used the F word.
Janco followed Gibbs silently through the hallway, passing other rooms. A minute later, Janco and Taylor waited for Gibbs to unlock the door.
As soon as he entered the room, Janco smelled a musty odor inside. A king-size bed lay in the middle with a dirty sheet on it that had not been cleaned for years, apparently. As soon as he saw the bed, Janco felt an urge to lie down and sleep, and his legs weighed a ton each. It had been quite a ride from his cell that had started eight hours back.

Inside the room, Janco walked on the worn-out green carpet, went into the bathroom and turned the knob for the hot water. He held his palm out and felt the warm water that had been a rarity in the jail. He came out of the bathroom and saw only Taylor. Gibbs must have gone out for something.
“Can I take a shower?” Janco asked.
Taylor was opening a suitcase. Without looking up, he said, “Go ahead.”
Janco reentered the bathroom and swiftly locked the door as if someone would come in and stop his impending warm shower. Janco took his clothes off and entered the tub, turned the knob and let the water fall on his back. It felt like a massage.
At least fifteen minutes must have passed in the bath. Janco heard a knock on the door and then another one. He hurried, put on his clothes and came out of the bathroom.
“Got your cheeseburger.” Gibbs pointed at the McDonald’s take-out paper bag on the bed. “Eat, get some rest. We’re waiting for word when to move out.”
Janco almost ran toward the food, opened the bag, and started devouring the burger.
After finishing his food, he fell asleep on the bed.

JANCO WOKE UP on the bed and noticed Gibbs and Taylor sleeping on the same bed. The room’s darkness was violated only by a slice of light from the lamppost outside.
It was midnight, or it could be five in the morning; Janco couldn’t tell. He sat up and adjusted to the fact that he wasn’t in jail anymore. He stood up and headed for the bathroom with measured steps through the darkness, without turning the lights on, making sure not to wake up the two sleeping men.
Once inside the bathroom, Janco splashed warm water on his face, and it felt good, and he joyfully realized this was the first time he’d woken up a free man since his incarceration. After doing his business, he took a fresh use-and-throw razor blade from the toilet counter and smiled at it, a sharp contrast to the used razors he’d received in the jail. He applied the soap to his face and checked it in the mirror. The thick lather covered his face, and he felt his face muscles being massaged by it.
Minutes later, his shaving was done, no cut this time.

When he returned to the room, he saw the lights were on, Gibbs slipping out of his pajamas and putting on nicer clothes and Taylor still lying in the bed. Gibbs glanced at Janco and then turned to Taylor. “Wake up.” He gave Taylor’s shoulder a shake.

Later, they were back on the highway. Gibbs drove this time and the woman sat in the passenger seat. Janco wanted to ask if his papers were ready but kept his mouth shut.

An hour later, the traffic became thicker, and Janco could see they were driving through a more populated area now. He mustered enough courage and asked Taylor, who was sitting next to him, “Where am I headed?”

Taylor said nothing for a few seconds and then looked out the window and said, “Italy.”

“Where in Italy?”

Taylor simply shook his head and looked outside, pretending to be keenly interested in the scenery outside, unwilling to divulge the location.

“Am I going to a good touristy place?” Janco inquired.

“Does it matter?”

Janco had other questions. *Where will I stay? When do I meet the Iranians? Will you give me some money? More importantly, are the Feds after me?* But he decided to ask those questions later. *Let me get out of America first*, he thought.

He turned his head just to see if anyone was following – no one.

Janco observed that nobody in the car was concerned about being followed and looked relaxed and calm. The woman was dozing, Taylor enjoying the view outside, and Gibbs kept passing other vehicles. Janco wondered if that was because they were professionals or if they really weren’t who they’d said they were.

An hour later, Gibbs took an exit, filled up the gas tank, and bought some snacks and beverages. The woman took over the wheel, and Gibbs occupied the passenger seat again.

Later, they were at Los Angeles International Airport. The car stopped at the international terminal. Gibbs and Taylor alighted, and Janco understood he had to get out as well. Gibbs moved behind the car and took the suitcase out of the trunk. Without saying anything to the woman, Gibbs proceeded to the terminal’s gate. Janco watched the car moving away slowly, and the woman disappeared into oblivion.

When Janco turned his face to the terminal door, he saw Gibbs standing there with an irritated face and gave him the *come on* look. Taylor was gone.

As he stepped inside the terminal, Janco saw a police officer staring at him. He got a shiver down his leg but then realized the cop might not be looking for him. Janco followed Gibbs inside the terminal, passing the airline check-in counters and the passengers standing in the queue. It was a new scene for Janco, all the people, the polished floor, the TVs and the monitors all around – in the last two years he had seen something like this only on that CRT TV he was allowed to watch for an hour a day in the prison.

As Janco walked through the concourse, he saw the phones hanging on the cradles. His heart ached to make a call to Mark, his elder son, who was the only person who had kept any contact with him since his incarceration.

But he knew better. The Feds might be talking to him, and a trap might have been set already. He decided to call his son after reaching Italy.

"Take this," Gibbs stuffed a hundred-dollar bill into Janco's shirt pocket. "Buy what you like, but make it quick."

Janco knew that he was leaving America, maybe for good, and Gibbs had realized Janco might want to take some American keepsake with him.

Gibbs isn't that bad a man, Janco thought. Maybe Gibbs had been under stress, and that was why he'd been so rude.

With the money in his pocket, Janco looked around. There was a chocolate shop, an alcohol store, a few fast food and coffee stalls. Janco entered a shop that displayed a number of newspapers and magazines.

He bought two newspapers, a copy of *Time* magazine and a large pack of M&M candy. He put the ninety-two dollars and forty-seven cents, returned by the clerk, in his pocket. As soon as Janco came out of the shop, Gibbs started walking, pulling his black carry-on suitcase.

A few minutes later, Janco saw Taylor waiting near a Starbucks, a bunch of papers in his hand, which he handed to Gibbs.

Janco smelled the aroma of coffee beans that smelled like the fragrance of freedom to him.

Gibbs checked the papers quickly and handed a passport to Janco, a piece of paper tucked inside the passport. Janco took it out and recognized it was an itinerary.

"The ticket says the destination is Milan," Janco said to Gibbs.

“We fly to Milan. Then someone will pick us up and drive us to our final destination,” Gibbs said tersely.
“Will you be driving?”
“Stop asking stupid questions.”
Janco noticed Taylor was gone.
Later, Janco stood in front of the airline counter, holding the American passport – name: Jonathan Smolder, Janco’s fraudulent name. He tried to memorize it. The passport appeared as good as an original. Janco knew he was in good hands, if only he knew who exactly they were.
Maybe time would answer all his questions, so he patiently waited in the line that led to the airline check-in counter.
A few minutes later, he handed his passport to the lady at the counter and put on a smile just like the one in the picture on his passport. She flipped through a few pages, looked at the photo in the passport, and then at Janco. Apparently satisfied, she typed something into the keyboard.
The good thing about American immigration was that while going out of the country one didn’t have to be confronted by an unfriendly immigration officer, unlike in other countries. Janco knew that the airline employee wasn’t going to ask a whole bunch of questions unless there was a big red line dangling over his name on the monitor.
“Aisle seat?” the lady clerk asked.
He didn’t care; seat selection was the last thing on his mind. The first, second and third thing on his mind was how to get the hell out of America. He would sit on the roof if no seats were available.
“Yes, please,” he said politely.
The lady again typed something into the keyboard, and then his boarding pass came out of the noisy printer. Janco took it and stepped to the side, waiting for Gibbs to finish his check-in.
Soon, Janco and Gibbs were heading for the security gate, their plane about to take off in thirty-five minutes.
On the way, he saw Taylor waiting near a pillar. Janco could see Gibbs and Taylor exchanging winks and nods, a sign indicating that everything was going okay and as planned.
But will everything be okay for me? Janco wondered.

WHEN THE BOEING 777 took off into the air, it was about eight p.m. Janco watched the streetlights disappear as the aircraft gained altitude, perhaps his last sight of America, unless the FBI captured him and dragged his ass back to his motherland someday.

On the display monitor, he saw the plane leave American airspace and felt a wave of calm envelope him. The first stage of his escape had been completed.

He looked at Gibbs, who was sitting next to him, reading a book, his entire attention pinned on it. But Janco knew Gibbs was hearing everything around him, observing everyone around him. Janco came to the realization that this man was meticulous, and he planned and executed his mission without flaw. He started admiring Gibbs – the man giving him his freedom.

The plane attained a height of thirty thousand feet, and Janco felt a feeling of euphoria pass over him. The passenger in the window seat had shuttered the window, and Janco wondered if this plane was being chased by a fighter jet of some kind like they show in movies.

Knowing the chance of that was little to none, Janco closed his eyes, hoping to get some sleep.